

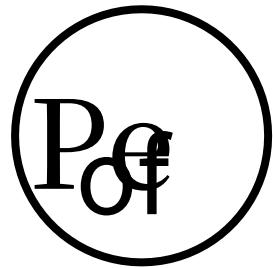


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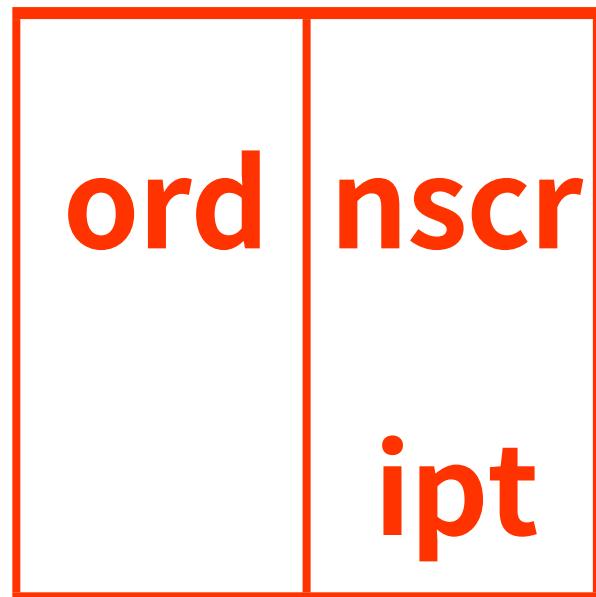
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Editor's Note: In early 1969, the 15-year-old Xi Jinping arrived at Liangjiahe Village, Wen'an County, Yanchuan County on the Loess Plateau, remaining there until his departure in October 1975. During these seven years, he became one with the villagers on this yellow earth, sharing their labours of carrying manure and coal, building dams across the river, constructing biogas pits, and eating corn "dumplings" together. He later reflected with deep emotion: "The seven years of arduous life imperilled me greatly. Two major gains stand out: first, it taught me what practicality means, what seeking truth from facts entails, and what the masses represent. These are lessons that have benefited me throughout my life. Second, it cultivated my self-confidence..."

This article is compiled from the serialised interview "Xi Jinping's Seven Years as an Educated Youth" published in Study Times.

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Liangjiahe resident Qu T'ou, born in October 1951, native of Liangjiahe Village, Wen'anyi Town, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province. He was one of the first group of youth who, alongside villagers, went to Wen'anyi Commune to work in 1968. After returning home, he joined other Beijing-based educated youths back to Liangjiahe. He commenced employment at the local police station in 1971, serving as an assistant officer with the Yanchuan County Traffic Police Brigade before retiring in April 2013.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview date: 26 February 2016

Location: Liangjiahe Village Committee, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

Interview Team: Over forty years ago, a group of educated youths arrived from Beijing to work in the countryside. You and over a dozen fellow villagers walked from Liangjiahe to Wenanyi to bring fifteen of these youths back to the village, among whom was Xi Jinping. Could you describe your first encounter with him?

WangXianpingThis cohort of educated youths from the capital departed Beijing on 13 January 1969 and arrived at our Wen'anyi Commune (present-day Wen'anyi Town, Yanchuan County, Yan'an City, Shaanxi Province) on 16 January. Fearing their luggage would be too heavy, our village dispatched over a dozen strong labourers to meet them. Upon their arrival at Wen'anyi, villagers assisted the educated youths in unloading their belongings from the lorry. At that time, county and commune officials presented a roster assigning each educated youth to their designated commune. Our brigade (now an administrative village) received fifteen: four female educated youths and eleven males, including Xi Jinping. He was tall and thin, though none of us knew his name at the time. We shared a communal meal at the commune, featuring a large stew and corn dumplings. Afterwards, each brigade collected the educated youths assigned to them.

As we helped them carry their luggage, we noticed two particularly heavy cases: an old-fashioned brown trunk and a leather suitcase, both worn and unremarkable in appearance. We were puzzled and remarked "Why are these so heavy? Whose luggage is this?"

Xi Jinping replied "These are mine."

At the time, we didn't know Xi Jinping by name. Our first impression was simply of this tall, thin young man carrying two exceptionally heavy trunks. And so, shouldering the luggage, we escorted the educated youths back to the village.

Over forty years ago, the ravine leading into Liangjiahe was a treacherous dirt track. A narrow strip of land sandwiched between two mountains, it featured a winding, goat-track-like path winding deep into the hills. How narrow was this path? Not even a two-wheeled cart could pass through it. This illustrates just how remote and isolated Liangjiahe Village was back then.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

remote and isolated.

Upon reaching the village, we divided the educated youth into two teams: Team One, comprising nine members, was stationed at the front of the village; Team Two, with six members, was positioned at the rear. Xi Jinping was assigned to Team Two at the time, and the cave dwelling he occupied was very close to my family's home. Initially, the village provided cooks for the educated youth. After several months, having mastered the essentials of rural cooking, they began preparing their own meals. Their early attempts were far from palatable, yet they made do. Life was austere then—meat was a rare luxury, and dishes were often dry and unseasoned. Yet hunger made taste secondary; mere satiety felt like a blessing.

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping and the Beijing educated youth settled into the village, when did you and the villagers begin to get to know them?

Wang Xianping: Initially, we were quite unfamiliar with one another, but gradually we grew to know each other. Back then, our Liangjiahe hamlet in this remote mountain valley had a population of over two hundred villagers. The Beijing educated youth, arriving from the big cities to this isolated mountain hollow, found the local way of life quite unsettling. The first people they came into contact with were the young villagers. I myself was also an educated youth, having returned several months earlier. But I was different from them: I was a returning educated youth, born and bred in this village. I had attended secondary school in the county but responded to Chairman Mao's call to return home to receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants. As I was a farmer myself, returning to my hometown to join the commune and living alongside my parents and fellow villagers, I had no issues adapting to life there.

The young men of our village, being of similar age to the Beijing educated youth, were the first to become acquainted with them. We lived in close proximity, labouring and living together. At that time, the countryside lacked even radios, and beyond farm work, there was little entertainment. The young people often gathered to chat (in Yanchuan dialect), and through these everyday interactions, Xi Jinping and his companions became familiar with the entire village's commune members.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

Interview Team: After you got to know Xi Jinping, did you discover what was inside his trunk?

Wang Xianping: Nothing but books. After Xi arrived in Liangjiahe, several young villagers would often visit him for a natter, and I frequently dropped by his cave dwelling. During one casual conversation, I remarked on his large stack of books" Xi, how did you come by so many books?" He replied"**It** suddenly dawned on me"No wonder those two boxes were so heavy when you arrived—they were full of books, no wonder they were impossible to carry"

Interview Team: What sort of books were in his trunks? Did you ever see his books?

Wang Xianping: Several of the educated youths brought books with them, which we shared. Most were cultural textbooks covering philosophy, politics, economics and such; others were foreign literary classics or novels by Chinese authors. At that time, Xi Jinping was fifteen or sixteen, and I was seventeen or eighteen. We'd all come to the countryside while still of school age and were intensely hungry for knowledge. In those days, our remote mountain village had no electricity, let alone television or the internet as we know it today. There was nothing To understand the outside world, books were our only window, yet even in the countryside, books were hard to come by.

In those days, submitting a blank exam paper or scoring zero was considered commendable, **I** remained unaffected by such prevailing attitudes. He loved reading, was 'obsessed' with it, absorbing knowledge at every opportunity. Back then, cultural life was scarce throughout society. The Loess Plateau was isolated and desolate; indoors, one was confined to dim cave dwellings; outdoors, one was surrounded by endless yellow earth stretching across the mountains and fields. Reading during his spare moments from labour

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position

through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

a way to enrich himself and prevent his time from being wasted.

I often visited Xi Jinping's cave dwelling and frequently perused his books. Sometimes I would borrow his volumes to read, and through this exchange, our shared topics of conversation grew ever more numerous, often centring on the knowledge contained within those pages. Though our educational backgrounds were comparable, and I was several years his senior, when considering our respective family upbringings, social environments, and life experiences, there was a considerable gap between our respective knowledge and horizons. Yet Xi Jinping was remarkably humble; this disparity in knowledge did not create a barrier between us. On the contrary, his easygoing nature encouraged me to befriend him, discuss all manner of subjects, and seek his counsel whenever I encountered something I did not understand.

Each day after returning from working in the fields, he would eat and then read. Come evening, he would light a kerosene lamp to study. These lamps were rudimentary: spent ink bottles filled with kerosene, fitted with a lead tube over the opening, into which a wick was inserted and lit for illumination. Xi Jinping would take a book and read by that faint light. Sitting so close, the kerosene fumes often left his face and nose blackened. Even in such harsh conditions, he would read late into the night, only retiring when utterly exhausted. Being one who enjoyed writing and drawing, I often took on the role of the village 'cultured fellow'. This made communication with Xi Jinping all the easier, and I took pleasure in visiting his dwelling. By day we worked together; by night I would seek him out in their cave dwelling for conversation.

Back then, we were both young men in our teens and twenties, brimming with energy. After a full day's labour, we still had plenty of vigour left at night. We'd burn the oil lamp late into the night, chatting telling stories, sharing jokes – we had so much in common. In those days, villagers who knew each other well would often use nicknames. Because of my dark skin, my nickname was "Blackie," and Xi Jinping always called me **that**. One day in September, I visited Xi Jinping's cave dwelling for a chat. He pulled a notebook from a box and said, "Heizi, I'd like to give you this notebook. Would you like it?" I replied, "How could I not want it? If you're giving it to me, I'll take it."

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

? If you're giving it to me, I'll take it." I never brought myself to write in that notebook and have kept it ~~h~~

In January 1971, the county issued a notice to the village, preparing to transfer me to work at Guanzhuang Commune. One day in February, after finishing work, I went to Xi Jinping's cave dwelling to chat. He already knew about my transfer. After talking for a while, he took out a copy of Chairman Mao's Poems and Prose, inscribed "To Heizi: A memento of your work" in pen, and gave it to me. This day, he never calls me by my full name, Wang Xianping, but always by my childhood nickname, "Heizi".

We often discussed the world beyond the mountains, particularly what the capital city of Beijing was like. Having never been to Beijing myself, I greatly admired someone like Xi Jinping who hailed from such a metropolis. Through his accessible descriptions, I gained a tangible understanding of life outside our mountainous region. We also exchanged knowledge from books and shared insights on academic pursuits. Beyond this, we frequently discussed local matters. Through our conversations, Xi gained a detailed understanding of Liangjiahe's mountainous terrain, the villagers' livelihoods, grain yields, food reserves, seasonal routines, daily sustenance, living conditions, and more.

In agricultural matters, Xi Jinping also sought my guidance on numerous occasions. For instance, how to hoe the fields, how to plough the land, how to turn the soil, how to drive livestock, what crops suited which terrain, what soil types favoured which plants... As a native of northern Shaanxi and the son of farmers, I naturally possessed this knowledge. Thus, I imparted all I knew about labour matters to him without reservation.

Interview Team: You were in the same production brigade as Xi Jinping at the time. Did you often work alongside him?

Wang Xianping: Yes. At that time, the Beijing educated youth, including Xi Jinping, were all city children.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

We weren't particularly adept at tasks like tilling and hoeing the fields. The local lads managed farm work a bit better than them, but we still fell far short compared to the village farmers. Therefore, based on the circumstances, the village organised us children who were not adept at farming into a construction team. This team primarily worked on building earthen dams in the mountain valleys (raising the mountain passes with earthen embankments to level the land in the valleys and create terraced fields) and constructing terraced fields on the mountainsides, rather than engaging in crop cultivation. With its rugged terrain and scarce arable land, northern Shaanxi greatly benefited from dammed fields and terraces, which significantly increased cultivable area and grain yields. Xi Jinping worked with remarkable vigour and resilience. Though his labour skills lagged behind those of us farmers, he spared no effort – indeed, he often worked harder than any of us.

Take dam construction, for instance. Back then, there were no heavy machinery—no excavators or tampers. Everything relied on manual labour: layer upon layer of earth laid by hand, then compacted with heavy tamping stones to densify the loose soil. It was exceptionally strenuous physical work. There were virtually no safety precautions back then. Xi Jinping worked without gloves, gripping the tamping stone's rope directly with his bare hands and using his entire body weight to drive it into the loess. By the end of the day, his palms were covered in blisters. When he returned to work the next day, those blisters would burst and begin to bleed. Yet no matter how exhausting or gruelling the task, Xi Jinping would persevere relentlessly, never once "**shirking**" (a Yanchuan dialect term meaning to cut ~~or~~ slack off).

Such gruelling labour left everyone exhausted after just two or three hours. While resting by the roadside, us energetic youngsters would pair off for wrestling matches, cheered on by those sitting out. Once, when I wrestled Xi Jinping—three years my junior and lacking wrestling experience—I threw him to the ground with ease. Though defeated, Xi Jinping was stubborn by nature and refused to concede. He insisted on another contest. We wrestled many times after that, and though he never won, his competitive spirit flared. Whenever he got the chance, he'd challenge me to a "**"friendly sparring session"**". That period was exceptionally hard work, but we

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

young lads were thoroughly happy.

I worked alongside Ping for three years. By late 1971, I'd taken up a post in the county seat, returning home roughly every fortnight. Though I still often chatted with Ping and read books together, our days of labouring side by side and wrestling were over.

After two or three years, Xi Jinping had become thoroughly familiar with the farming tasks common in our northern Shaanxi region. Though not yet proficient in all tasks, he could at least perform them. Having initially engaged in dam-building and terraced field construction, he became particularly adept at these. Consequently, when later assigned to "social education work" in Zhaojiahe and subsequently returning to Liangjiahe to manage village affairs, he continued undertaking such infrastructure projects. Until his departure from Liangjiahe in 1975, Xi Jinping never ceased these foundational construction efforts.

Interview Team: Faced with the harsh natural environment and arduous labour of the Loess Plateau in northern Shaanxi, did Xi Jinping and the other Beijing educated youth ever consider leaving this place during the initial period?

WangXianping Initially, the Beijing educated youth struggled to adapt to the environment here, and many did wish to leave. Indeed, a significant number departed quite early on. The timing of their departures varied considerably: some returned to the city after only a few months, while others stayed for one or two years before gradually leaving through recruitment drives or enlisting in the military.

During the Cultural Revolution, one's family background played a crucial role in determining their prospects. Among the educated youth, those whose parents worked in the military were considered **offspring of "red families"** (). For them, enlisting in the army or returning to the city was relatively straightforward. Conversely, those from so-called "black gang backgrounds" – families with unfavourable origins or political histories – were confined to rural placement as farmers. They were denied approval for military service or urban repatriation. Xi Jinping fell into this category. During his placement, his father, Xi Zhongxun, was

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position

through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

persecuted and sent down to the grassroots level, with the entire family suffering repercussions.

By that time, all the Beijing educated youths in Liangjiahe from "red families" or with favourable class backgrounds had departed within less than two years. Only two remained: Xi Jinping and Lei Pingsheng. By 1974, Lei Pingsheng had also left. Xi Jinping was the last to depart in 1975. He spent a total of seven years in Liangjiahe, the longest among the fifteen educated youths sent there.

During one of our chats in the cave dwelling, Xi Jinping once remarked to me: "When I was hungry, the villagers cooked for me; when my clothes were dirty, they washed them; when my trousers were torn, they mended them. The people of Liangjiahe treated me well, and I shall remember that forever." He genuinely regarded the common folk as his own kin. It can be said that Xi Jinping not only understood the hardships of ordinary people but also held profound affection for them.

The villagers of Liangjiahe genuinely cared for these educated youths, including Xi Jinping, treating them as their own kin. I recall one small incident: beneath the cave dwelling where Xi Jinping lived lay another row of caves, home to a young man named Li Yintang who was very close to Xi Jinping. Li Yintang worked as a labourer in Tongchuan. On one occasion when he returned home, he brought back a pound or two of rice. In northern Shaanxi at that time, rice was a rare commodity, scarcely eaten even during festivals. Li Yintang set the rice down and said to his mother, "Mother, steam some rice and let Xi Jinping have a taste too." Li Yintang's mother washed the rice meticulously, steamed a pot of white rice, ladled a bowl, and then told her son, "Hurry up and take it to Xi Jinping while it's still hot." A few days later, when I returned to the village to visit Jinping, he told me: "I got to eat white rice the other day!" I asked: "Blimey, how did you manage to get your hands on such a treat?" Jinping replied: "Yintang's mum sent me a bowl. I ate it with relish (Yanchuan dialect, meaning 'I ate it with great relish')."

The villagers of Liangjiahe in the early seventies could never have imagined that Xi Jinping would one day become

General Secretary of the Party

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

and President of the nation. Back then, Xi was a "child of gangsters" with no prospects, his first steps into society fraught with hardship. Yet ~~he~~ of Liangjiahe did not judge by appearance, nor did they condone the discrimination inherent in that abnormal political climate—what grave offence could a child of learning have committed? On what grounds were such heavy labels imposed upon them? Thus, the villagers treated all educated youths equally.

The villagers of Liangjiahe simply held the sincere belief that these children from the capital, who had once lived comfortable lives with ample food and clothing, had left their homes to come to our poor mountain hollow. Without their parents by their side, it was truly no easy feat. Though the villagers themselves were dirt poor, they were all willing to do their utmost to look after these children properly.

Interview Team: We understand that Xi Jinping's journey to join the Party was exceptionally arduous due to his father Xi Zhongxun's political persecution at the time?

Wang Xianping: Indeed, it required considerable effort. Back then, in rural areas, children of landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, rightists, bad elements, and rightists were barred from joining the Party. As for these educated youths from the cities, they were classified as "children of gang members" and similarly prohibited from membership. Under the political climate of the time, your "lineage"—that is, your "class background" – was the primary factor determining whether you could become a Party member, only then was your work performance considered. For someone like Xi Jinping, no matter how diligent he was in his work or how loyal to the Party, his prospects of joining were extremely slim due to his family background.

I joined the Party in 1969 and witnessed the rigorous vetting process firsthand. After submitting my application, the organisation first investigated whether I myself had any political issues. Only after clearing this hurdle did they scrutinise my primary family connections and social relationships. Through this investigation, only those whose relatives had not been imprisoned, had no "landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, or rightists" among ~~them~~

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were commendable, only then could one join the Party. If an applicant's relatives had issues, membership was denied. Xi Jinping was born into a revolutionary family. Given his upbringing and family education, his loyalty to the Party

can be said to be innate. He undoubtedly aspired to join the Party. Moreover, the incident with wrestling demonstrates that once he sets his mind on something, he is remarkably persistent and will not easily abandon it. To my knowledge, he repeatedly submitted applications to join the Party, presenting them to the organisation more than ten times. Yet each time he was met with indifference, primarily due to **the so-called "issues"** surrounding his father, Xi Zhongxun.

Yet Xi Jinping persisted, drafting his application time and again. Moreover, he was renowned locally for his diligent work ethic. Witnessing this situation, the Party Secretary of Wen'anyi at the time, unable to make a decision, personally travelled to Yanchuan County to seek guidance from Shen Yang, the county Party secretary.

Shen Yang investigated Xi Jinping's conduct firsthand, confirming his outstanding work performance and consistently favourable public feedback – fully meeting the standards of a Communist Party member. As a descendant of revolutionaries from the Shaanxi-Gansu Border Region, Shen Yang deeply understood Xi Zhongxun's political integrity and strongly disapproved of the prevailing persecution of veteran cadres and their families. Thus, with Comrade Shen Yang's full support, Xi Jinping was finally admitted to the Party.

Interview Team: After joining the Party, Xi Jinping was selected as the Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe. Could you elaborate on the initiatives he undertook in this role?

Wang Xianping: Upon becoming secretary, Xi Jinping's first initiative was to lead the villagers in constructing a silt dam at the head of the village gully.

Initially, there was little support for this project. The dam's location was at the main gully – the main watercourse and a vital thoroughfare to the village. During the rainy season, this area would collect the entire

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All the rainwater from the mountain ravines converged here during heavy downpours, creating the most formidable floodwaters. At that time, sparse vegetation on the slopes meant the soil could not retain moisture, and soil erosion on the Loess Plateau was severe. When it rained, the river swelled dramatically. Consequently, constructing the silt-trapping dam at this location meant it faced intense torrential flood impacts.

At the time, the villagers of Liangjiahe debated: "Xi Jinping wants to build a large sediment retention dam for our village to grow more grain. That's a good thing. But that spot sees such fierce waters during the rainy season. If it gets washed away, it'll be a waste of manpower and resources, all for nothing. It's bound to fail." For centuries, no sediment retention dam had ever been built at this location. Most villagers held conservative views, reasoning that if their ancestors had failed to accomplish it, there must be a sound reason why they too would fail. Consequently, the majority opposed the project.

Yet Jinping was determined to build this dam. Not only did he personally visit every household to persuade them, but he also enlisted my help. He said to me: "Heizi, you've always been the  (referring to someone who frequently assists villagers with weddings and funerals, typically someone educated and organised). The villagers listen to you. Help me convince them."

Naturally, I wished to support Jinping, yet I harboured little confidence in the dam's viability. I replied "I'll gladly assist with persuasion, but can this dam truly be completed? That location experiences significant water flow, with summer floods that could genuinely breach it -"

Pingji replied "I've planned this thoroughly. We'll block the river mouth on one side and reinforce the silt dam's other flank. Then we'll deepen and dredge part of the natural channel to create a major flood-release channel. As long as this channel can withstand peak summer flows, the dam's safety is assured. We must execute the construction meticulously and ensure quality. Once this sediment retention dam is completed, vast tracts of fertile farmland stretching from here all the way to our village will emerge."

Considering the local terrain, I carefully weighed Xi Jinping's proposal and found his reasoning sound.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

and nodded in agreement.

Pingji continued "Heizi, why do you think Liangjiahe is impoverished? Why do we struggle to feed ourselves? It's simply because we have too little land. Building this dam here will create such a large area of irrigated land that generations of Liangjiahe villagers will benefit. We absolutely must see this project through!"

I replied "Jingping, it can be done! I'll help you persuade the villagers too."

Immediately, I went to Wenlanyi Commune and phoned my workplace. I told my supervisor, "I'll be returning a day or two late. There's something I need to sort out in the village . . ."

Afterwards, I specifically sought out the old villagers who were most strongly opposed. I worked to persuade them, explaining in detail all the measures Xi Jinping had planned for reinforcement and flood prevention. I said "Of course, the scenario you describe—floodwaters breaching the dam—is possible. ~~As~~ long as we construct the flood-discharge channel properly, the safety of the silt-trapping dam will be assured."

I further persuaded them: "Look, Jinping has always been steady and dependable in his work. When has he ever acted recklessly or rashly? Though he's an outsider, not one of us Liangjiahe natives, he serves as our secretary, managing our household. He labours diligently each day, leading everyone in work—he puts in the most effort. Returning home, he must wash clothes and cook meals—it's no easy task. Now overseeing the village's affairs, big and small, he sacrifices even more. He could easily have avoided advocating for this dam—better safe than sorry. Yet he chose to lead the labour himself, enduring such hardship. What does he gain? Nothing but ensuring our village grows more grain to fill our bellies. When we have surplus grain, we can store it away. Wouldn't that mean better days ahead? You elders hold respect in the village. You must support him ~~in~~ ~~now~~ . . ."

Gradually, the elders were persuaded by my words. They nodded and said "This lad, Xi Jinping is indeed dependable. He truly has the village's best interests at heart. You young people are educated and understand more than we do."

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

so we really can't oppose it."

During this period, Jinping continued persuading the villagers, and with my assistance, the vast majority came round to the idea. Though a few holdouts remained, they no longer swayed the outcome. Thus began the vigorous construction of this large-scale silt dam. The dam was substantial in scale, demanding considerable labour. The entire village poured its strength into the effort, and after immense toil, the structure finally took shape.

Throughout the dam's construction, Xi Jinping poured his entire passion and energy into the project. He worked day and night, rising early and retiring late – what we'd now call "**working round the clock**" and "**seven days a week**" – dedicating all his efforts to this endeavour. He demanded swift progress without compromising quality, particularly at critical flood-impact zones, ensuring they were fortified to impregnable standards. Not only did he direct operations from the front line, but he also worked alongside the villagers, shovelling earth, tamping soil, and hauling massive stones for the embankment. This collective effort fuelled tremendous morale, accelerating the dam's construction.

At the final stage, the dam construction encountered issues with the specifications of the flood discharge channel. Xi Jinping travelled to the county seat, summoned the water conservancy department for an on-site inspection, meticulously calculated all relevant flood discharge data, and ensured construction adhered strictly to standards. The sides of the flood discharge channel were securely reinforced with stone masonry.

Once completed, this silt-trapping dam proved remarkably sturdy, allowing summer floods to flow smoothly through the drainage channels. During the rainy season, Xi Jinping paid close attention to maintenance and protection, strictly overseeing flood discharge management. Consequently, the dam remained robust, and the vast expanse of land on its crest continued to yield grain. Several years after Xi Jinping departed Liangjiahe, neglect in village management and maintenance, compounded by exceptionally severe flooding that year, caused a section of the dam to collapse. Subsequently, villagers restored the damaged portion. The silt-trapping dam we see today is entirely identical to its 1970s form.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

The land atop the dam is the finest, most level, and most easily irrigated in our Liangjiahe village.

Interview Team: Having visited the silt dam and witnessed the arduous nature of land reclamation back then, what other events remain particularly memorable to you?

Wang Xianping: If we're talking about what left a deep impression, we must mention Xi Jinping leading the villagers in establishing biogas facilities and constructing roads.

After assuming the role of Party Secretary in Liangjiahe Village, Xi Jinping was determined to transform the village's production and living conditions, thereby improving villagers' livelihoods. However, the villagers' mindset remained rather insular, and their initial reaction to new concepts and ideas was often outright opposition. When Xi proposed establishing biogas facilities, he encountered precisely this resistance. Some villagers, particularly the more conservative elders, grumbled: "Digging a pit, filling it with dung, and expecting it to catch fire? Impossible!"

Xi Jinping travelled to Sichuan to study biogas digester construction techniques. Upon his return, he initiated the construction of biogas digesters. Once the first digester was operational, producing biogas that successfully ignited, its impact was profound. Witnessing this tangible result, the villagers gradually came to believe in the technology. Moreover, it genuinely resolved our local shortage of firewood.

Soon after, biogas production spread throughout our neighbourhood, with most villages in the county beginning to emulate Liangjiahe. The Shaanxi Province biogas field conference was even held in our village.

The road now connecting our village to the outside world was constructed alongside the biogas project. What was once a narrow, winding path impassable even to a handcart was transformed into a smooth, wide thoroughfare. This was necessary because cement and sand for the biogas digester had to be transported in, requiring the road to be built first. In turn, this road brought further benefits to the village's development.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

These developments illustrate how experiments and practices aimed at improving people's lives often drive related progress, which in turn delivers sustained benefits to the populace. Such matters are intrinsically interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Another noteworthy aspect was Xi Jinping's strong emphasis on promoting cultural literacy among the villagers.

During daily labour and communal life, Xi Jinping lived side by side with the villagers. In conversation, he not only shared stories of the world beyond the mountains but also imparted cultural knowledge, constantly devising ways to encourage everyone to learn.

After I left the village to work in the county, I returned roughly every fortnight to visit Jinping. Even after other educated youths had returned to the cities, his cave dwelling remained as bustling as ever, always visitors. Villagers loved to seek him out for conversation. One young man from our village, Wu Hui, frequently visited Jinping, asking questions about everything, brimming with curiosity about the outside world and a thirst for knowledge.

During a village Party branch meeting, Xi Jinping remarked "Our village has many like Wu Hui who yearn to learn. Young people who remain illiterate and uneducated will find no future. I propose organising a literacy class to bring everyone together to study".

At that time, most villagers were illiterate, and they were delighted to hear Xi Jinping's proposal. He acted immediately, setting up a literacy class. His goal was for every resident of Liangjiahe to recognise at least the most commonly used Chinese characters, and the more they could recognise, the better.

He personally copied cards inscribed with simple characters: one, two, three, four, five, six... Starting with these foundational numerals, he gradually introduced more common words: big, small, many, few; front, back, left, right; east, west, south, north; man, woman, old, young, and so forth. He first ensured villagers grasped these frequently used characters, reinforcing their understanding before gradually introducing more. Xi Jinping

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

typically gathered the villagers for literacy classes after evening meals during labour breaks or on rainy days when work was suspended.

Beyond literacy instruction, Xi Jinping frequently engaged the villagers in informal discussions. Through these relaxed and enjoyable exchanges, the people of Liangjiahe gained insights into customs and human geography beyond their mountainous surroundings, enriching their knowledge and broadening their horizons. Consequently, compared to neighbouring villages at the time, Liangjiahe's villagers possessed a higher level of cultural literacy and a significantly greater number of literate individuals.

Interview Team: Could you tell us about Xi Jinping's visits to see his fellow villagers after he left Liangjiahe? What other contact did you maintain with him?

Wang Xianping: After leaving the village to attend university, Xi Jinping continued to hold the villagers of Liangjiahe in his thoughts. Besides maintaining correspondence with the village, he returned on three occasions.

The first time was in 1993, when he was Secretary of the Fuzhou Municipal Party Committee. Despite his extremely busy schedule, he made time to visit everyone. The village didn't need to notify households individually; the news spread like wildfire among all the men, women and children. Everyone felt a deep bond with him, and upon hearing he was returning, they were overjoyed. It was the eighth lunar month, and someone remarked:"Ah, what perfect timing for Jinping's return! Our sweet potatoes are just coming in, so he'll get to taste our harvest."*

The villagers began preparing for his arrival well in advance, busily cooking meals and slaughtering two sheep.

Upon arriving in Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping was greeted by a throng of villagers. He chatted with the locals, shook hands with us "childhood companions," and warmly ~~on~~ on the shoulder in greeting. After a brief exchange, he ~~the~~ the time to ~~in~~

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

a while, Xi Jinping proceeded to visit every household in the village, inspecting each one. When he served as Liangjiahe's Party Secretary in the early 1970s, nearly two decades had passed. Seeing the villagers now living comfortably, with no worries about food or clothing, filled Xi Jinping with deep satisfaction. Back then, the villagers lived quite scattered, so he walked the entire length of the village, covering several miles.

At lunchtime, Xi Jinping filled a large bowl to the brim with mutton. After finishing he asked "Is there any more mutton left? I've been away from Liangjiahe for so many ~~nowhere~~ else have I tasted mutton this delicious." Shi Chunyang replied "Of course there is! ~~There~~ not be enough for you?" He promptly served Xi Jinping another large bowl of mutton, which Xi Jinping polished off. We asked "Xi Jinping, would you like some more?" He shook his head and said "Ah, I really can't manage any more. ~~But~~ if I ate any more!" The villagers all laughed.

In 2005, whilst in Beijing on business, I reconnected with several Beijing educated youths from my time in the countryside. They suggested "Hei Zi, since you're here, why not gather all the former educated youths for a reunion? Most are still in Beijing, though we don't know ~~him to the~~" I replied, "'Sundsgod'" So we began making contact, asking around and confirming one by one. We managed to reach every single one of the former educated youths. However, a few couldn't make it to the reunion: one was working in Britain and couldn't return, while two others had last minute commitments.

Xi Jinping had by then been transferred to work in Zhejiang. Lei Pingsheng rang him up "Jinping, Heizi's come up to Beijing. A few of us have got hold of all the old educated youths who were sent down to the countryside back then. We're planning a reunion. Could you make it back for it?"

Xi Jinping happened to be attending meetings during that period and was extremely busy. He wanted to return, but simply couldn't break free. He explained the situation to Lei Pingsheng and then instructed him "Heizi has come.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position

through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

give him 3,000 yuan on my behalf. Let him stay in Beijing a few extra days and take him around the sights and places of interest. He's come all this way to see us, so we must treat him well. Don't let him pay for his own tickets." "When we met up, Lei Pingsheng handed me 3,000 yuan, saying "Heizi, this is the money Xi Jinping gave you." "

On 13 November 2009, Xi Jinping—by then a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Vice President of the State—came to Yan'an for an inspection tour. His schedule was packed with numerous engagements, including reporting meetings and symposiums at municipal, county, township, and village levels. Consequently, Xi Jinping did not make a special trip to Liangjiahe to visit the villagers. However, he invited several of us close friends to Yan'an for dinner to catch up.

Upon arriving in Yan'an and seeing Xi Jinping after so many years, I was deeply moved. As we shook hands, I momentarily lost my words. Facing this childhood friend who was now a leader of the Party and the nation, I hesitated over whether to address him as "Vice-Chairman Xi" or simply **他**.

Xinping, however, broke the ice by using my childhood nickname. "Heizi! he exclaimed. "You've put on weight since last we met!" "

I chuckled heartily and replied "Indeed I have, but that's only because our living standards have improved and our environment has become much better."

"I heard you had persistent health issues in recent years," Xi Jinping remarked "Are you feeling better now?"

I replied "First it was stomach troubles that wouldn't clear up, then hypertension-induced heart disease. As one gets on in years, all sorts of ailments come knocking. But with medical care improving, I'm much better now - "

Xi Jinping asked "Are you still working?"

I replied, " I stepped down from my post in 2003 due to poor health at the time. Since then, I've been

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

resting at home to recuperate."

Xi Jinping inquired "Do you face any difficulties in your daily life now?"

I replied "I have no real difficulties. The municipal Party committee and government look after us retired workers very well. My food, clothing, spending, and daily necessities are all adequately provided for."

Xi Jinping nodded and asked "How are your family members? Have your children married? Do they have jobs?"

I replied "All is well at home. I now reside in the county town. My children have all started families and are employed, though my daughter-in-law is still seeking work. Nevertheless, life is quite comfortable in every respect."

Upon hearing that my health and family life were sound, Xi Jinping seemed genuinely pleased. He remarked, "Heizi, all these years later, do you recall when we worked in the village? Building that dam in Zhaizigou, I'd always challenge you to wrestling matches. I never managed to beat you, but I just couldn't accept it. Those were truly happy times . . ."

I replied "Xinping, if you haven't forgotten that, I certainly haven't either. We were both young back then, though I was a few years older than you, so it was only natural you couldn't wrestle me down. Still, had I known you'd become such a high-ranking official, I wouldn't have dared throw you to the ground"

Xi Jinping roared with laughter, saying "What nonsense you speak!"

Subsequently, Xi Jinping addressed me again "Heizi, having worked in the county for decades, you've seen more than the villagers, gained broader experience, and possess greater expertise in your work. You must offer more advice and suggestions for Liangjiahe, assisting Chunyang in managing the village affairs effectively."

I replied "Xinping, rest assured, I shall. The village comrades have kept in regular contact and exchanged views with me, discussing matters together. I shall do even better going forward."

During the meal, we discussed Shaanxi dialects and cuisine. Xi Jinping then asked the accompanying Shaanxi

Provincial Party Secretary

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

Zhao Leji "Comrade Leji, do you know what 'en-en' refers to?" Zhao Leji replied "I must confess I'm unfamiliar with that term."

Xi Jinping explained "En'en refers to steamed buns made from white flour—what we call mantou in standard Chinese. A local term in Yanchuan County."

He then turned to me: "Heizi, 俄 'momo' in Liangjiahe these days." He replied "Life has improved now. Our staple foods are mainly 'momo' and rice, along with other refined grains, with coarse grains only occasionally."

Xi Jinping then inquired "Do you still eat 'tuánzi'" (tuánzi specifically refers to a type of food made by mixing millet husks and corn husks into cormmeal to stave off hunger during times of 贫困)"

I replied "Not for years."

He inquired "Then what is the corn grown for now?"

I replied "A small portion for food, but most is used as animal feed."

After the banquet, Xi Jinping bid farewell to our group. He instructed me "Heizi, take good care of your health and exercise regularly. When you return, convey my regards to your wife Cunying and extend my greetings to the villagers."

I replied "Certainly. I shall convey your concern for the villagers. Do take care of yourself, and please extend my regards to your mother and family."

Xi Jinping replied "Thank you, thank you"

Interview Team: General Secretary Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe on 13 February 2015 to visit his fellow villagers. You were present at that time. Could you describe the circumstances of that day?

Wang Xianping: When Xi Jinping returned on 13 February 2015, it had been

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

That day, the county authorities did not inform us in advance that Xi Jinping was returning. They merely stated: "The Central Committee is convening a poverty alleviation work conference in Yan'an. A central leader in charge of poverty alleviation will be visiting Liangjiahe." *

Strangely enough, precisely because the leader's name hadn't been mentioned, the villagers all had a strong gut feeling that this might be Xi Jinping returning. So everyone flocked to the village committee's courtyard, waiting for this 'leader' to arrive.

The car halted at the village entrance. As the door swung open, Xi Jinping stepped out first, followed by Teacher Peng Liyuan. The moment the villagers saw them, the courtyard erupted. ¶ "It really is Comrade Xi Jinping! And Teacher Peng is here too!"

Instantly, villagers surged from the courtyard to the entrance, surrounding Xi Jinping. Some shook his hand, others linked arms with him, and many greeted him warmly. The scene was incredibly lively. Everyone was deeply moved. At this point, Xi Jinping's entourage stepped in top saying "Villagers, please make way! We understand your feelings, but we can't have the General Secretary squeezed out and unable to enter" Upon hearing this, the villagers gathered at the entrance parted to form a path, and everyone escorted Xi Jinping into the courtyard.

That day, Xi Jinping met with all his old friends and acquaintances in the village. He posed for group photos with the villagers, visited households, and inspected orchards and farmland. On this visit, he could recall each of our names—not just those we'd stayed in touch with, but even those we'd lost contact with over forty years. He recognised everyone instantly, addressing them by both formal and childhood names. Moreover, he remembered every mountain and gully in Liangjiahe by name, down to the last detail.

At lunchtime, Xi Jinping, Peng Liyuan, Shi Chunyang, Lü Housheng, Zhang Weipang, Liang Yuming, and I sat together at one table. Once everyone was seated, Xi Jinping introduced Peng Liyuan to our five teachers. Ms Peng greeted each of us in turn.

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

Teacher Peng Liyuan greeted each of us in turn.

Liang Yuming proposed "Xinping, you've come home today—let's have a couple of drinks!"

Hesitating briefly, Xi Jinping replied, "Very well, I'll take your word for it! With the New Year approaching, I've come to visit my fellow villagers and ought to offer everyone a toast." So we opened a bottle of wine, poured a little for each of us, and toasted one another with blessings.

The meal that day was **simple**, consisting of local **rural fare**. Xi Jinping explained each dish and soup on the table to Peng Liyuan in detail—what ingredients they contained, how they were prepared, and their flavours and characteristics.

I remarked "These dishes seem quite ordinary now; we eat them regularly. But when Xi Jinping was an educated youth sent to the countryside, only during the New Year could he enjoy such fine fare. Back then, there was little oil, and the dishes were thin and bland—the flavour was far inferior to what we have today."

Everyone sighed in agreement "Indeed, back then, having 'glutinous rice balls' to fill your stomach was considered a good life."

Xi Jinping asked Shi Chunyang "Suiwa, how many people live in the village now? Are they all here today?" Shi Chunyang replied "There are 410 people. With the New Year approaching, everyone is home."

Xi Jinping inquired further "How is livestock farming in the village? Do you still cultivate the land? What about the water supply situation now? How is the water quality?"

Shi Chunyang replied "Livestock farming is thriving—we have pig and chicken farms, though cattle and sheep are no longer raised. The mountain slopes are no longer cultivated; only the river terraces and dammed fields grow corn. Water supply is no issue now. Those wells you dug back then are still in use, and every household has running water—it's so convenient. We had the water quality tested by health authorities; it's excellent, meeting all standards..."

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

Xi Jinping then inquired "How are the elderly villagers faring now? Do they have regular access to rice and meat?"

The villagers replied "The elders are all doing well. Their meals are no problem; they eat quite well." Xi Jinping remarked with emotion "Life is good now. Back when I was sent down to Liangjiahe for seven years, I

once had rice—it was given to me by the villagers. That bowl of rice was truly fragrant!"

I replied "It was Li Yintang's family who gave it to you. You've mentioned it to me before, how wonderfully fragrant that bowl of rice was."

Xi Jinping said "Yes, yes, it was given to me by Aunt Yintang."

During the meal, Xi Jinping asked Zhang Weipang "Have you been to Beijing?"

Zhang Weipang replied "I have been. I visited Beijing last year."

Teacher Peng Liyuan inquired "Have you both been to Xiamen and Fuzhou?" Liang Yuming, Shi Chunyang, and Lü Housheng all answered, "Yes, we have."

Liang Yuming added to Teacher Peng Liyuan "Once, I took my son to Xiamen and visited your home. You personally cooked for us."

Ms Peng replied "Oh, it was so long ago, I don't recall. Heizi, you haven't been, have you?"

Feeling rather embarrassed, I replied "I haven't been anywhere."

Xi Jinping remarked "In future, you should all travel abroad to see how things develop elsewhere and broaden your horizons. Though our posts have changed and we're far apart, we must stay in touch. You're welcome to write to me often."

He added "I notice our Liangjiahe cadres are rather aged. That won't do. Take Zhang Weipang—he's still serving as team leader at his age. We must prioritise nurturing young village cadres..."

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

As lunch drew to a close, I raised my glass to Xi Jinping and said, "Jinping, rest assured. All the villagers will strive to develop industries swiftly, ensuring everyone prospers and brings honour to you."

Xi Jinping addressed the group: "Heizi speaks well. I hope the entire village enjoys a good life. Once everyone prospers, I shall be at ease."

Interview Team: Finally, could you share your thoughts on how those seven years of rural placement shaped General Secretary Xi Jinping?

Wang Xianping: President Xi Jinping's youthful struggles, particularly the tempering of his character during his years as an educated youth, and the formation of his worldview and values, undoubtedly bear significant connection to his subsequent achievements in leadership roles at all levels.

Life is fraught with contingencies, what we often call 'fate'. Yet within this lies a profound inevitability: the inner willpower and the active pursuit of spiritual fulfilment. When discussing an outstanding or even a great figure, we should focus on their journey of growth, the adversities they faced, the efforts they expended, and how their achievements were attained. Only the process can truly enlighten and inspire.

Xi Jinping's first step into society after leaving secondary school was in Liangjiahe. Though fraught with hardship, this experience tempered his resolve and bound him from the outset to China's most humble farmers – sharing their joys and sorrows, their fortunes and misfortunes. This forged an enduring bond that would shape his entire life—a profound affection for the people, a genuine concern for the common folk—a quality that no university or ivory tower could ever impart.

No matter what adversity one faces, as long as one confronts life with positivity, serves others selflessly, and holds lofty ideals, then whether one becomes a worker, farmer

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

scholar, doctor, teacher, or state official, you can serve the people and play an important role, even becoming a pillar of society.

From his youth, Xi Jinping harboured lofty aspirations. Yet his grand vision lay not in attaining high office or lofty positions, but in the seemingly ordinary pursuit of "doing practical things for the common folk." When he returned to Liangjiahe in 2015, he addressed the entire village with these words: "When I left Liangjiahe all those years ago, I resolved that should I ever enter public service, I would dedicate myself to practical work for the people." Hearing those words then, and reflecting on his actions over the years, I was deeply moved, nearly brought to tears. In that moment, I believe the villagers felt the same emotion: Xi Jinping's vision has indeed been realised today.

Reflecting on these memories of Xi Jinping and Liangjiahe, what moves me most is that neither Xi Jinping nor the people of Liangjiahe have changed. On the surface, Xi Jinping has risen from an ordinary, unconnected educated youth to become General Secretary of the Party and President of the nation; Liangjiahe has transformed from an impoverished, isolated mountain hamlet into a nationally renowned place. Yet at their core, they remain unchanged from forty years ago: Xi Jinping is still that "good lad" striving for better lives for ordinary people, and the people of Liangjiahe are still those simple folk who once gathered in groups to see him off to university.

Xi Jinping remarked "Though I left Liangjiahe back then, my heart has always remained here." In truth, what I understand by "here" does not refer solely to our Liangjiahe, but to every ordinary village and every common citizen.

I am delighted to revisit memories from over forty years ago through your interview. I myself am a simple commoner. From the day I began working until my retirement, I remained an ordinary employee, never holding any leadership position.

My acquaintance with Xi Jinping dates back to the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution. Yet what shaped him about him

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

were not shaped by slogans, propaganda or loudspeaker indoctrination. Rather, it was the daily toil and hardship of our years as educated youth, the profound influence of living side by side with our farming brothers for over two thousand four hundred days and nights.

This was more an emotional fusion, a spiritual unity. Xi Jinping rooted himself in the yellow earth, becoming one of us peasant brothers. From this grew a shared yearning for a better life and a common hope for the nation's future.

X i Jinping remarked: ••Do not underestimate Liangjiahe—it is a place of profound learning. Life is a continuous journey of discovery, where lessons await at every turn. •• Indeed, it was through this very mountain pass that our villagers escorted him to Liangjiahe; seven years later, we saw him off again along the same path. It was within this humble mountain hollow that Xi Jinping endured the most arduous seven years of his life.

In May 2002, I heard the news of Xi Zhongxun's passing. Given the limited means available at the time, I went to the county post office to send Xi Jinping a telegram expressing my condolences. A few days later, Xi Jinping replied: "Telegram received, thank you very much!" • You must understand that when Xi Jinping first arrived in Liangjiahe as an educated youth, we had no idea his father, Xi Zhongxun, had been Vice Premier of the State Council. We only knew he was an educated youth from Beijing. Later, the other educated youths gradually left, but Xi Jinping remained for various reasons. He also faced many difficulties in joining the Party and attending university. Gradually, we came to understand his background and grew concerned for him, yet he remained unperturbed. He truly rooted himself in the countryside, serving the people by building silt dams, terraced fields, and biogas facilities... dedicating seven full years to this work! Villagers remarked: "Who would have thought Xi Jinping was the son of the Vice Premier of the State Council? Who would have imagined the son of the Vice Premier would build biogas tanks and silt dams for us! Ordinary folk like us couldn't endure such hardship!" ~~Xi~~ Jinping's seven years of rural placement in Liangjiahe were years of hardship and suffering, yet also years of steadfast, hands-on work. During this period, every drop of sweat and every ounce of effort he expended embodied his guiding principle: "Work diligently on the ground and lead from the front." •

Wang Xianping: Xi Jinping has achieved his position

through his own steadfast and diligent efforts.

put into action the principle he espoused "Work diligently in practice, lead the way in action."

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Interviewee: Dai Ming, born 1952. A pupil at Xiyi Middle School in Haidian District, Beijing, he was sent to Liangjiahe Village, Yanchuan County, in January 1969 alongside Xi Jinping, where they shared the same cave dwelling. He left Liangjiahe in 1970 upon recruitment, subsequently working as a teacher, deputy county head for science and technology, director of the Industrial Department at Xi'an Institute of Geology, and retired as deputy director (at director level) of the Public Security Office at Chang'an University.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 6 June 2016

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Dai Ming: Xi Jinping never abandoned reading and reflection during his time in Liangjiahe

Interview Team: Comrade Dai Ming, hello! In 1969, you and Xi Jinping were sent to Liangjiahe Village in northern Shaanxi as educated youth. Could you describe the background of the educated youth movement at that time and the reasons for choosing northern Shaanxi?

Dai Ming: The backdrop to the educated youth being sent to the countryside was, simply put, the nationwide "Down to the Countryside" movement. We were all in school at the time when Chairman Mao issued the call: "It is absolutely necessary for educated youth to go to the countryside and undergo re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants." Once this call went out, everyone had to respond enthusiastically. In truth, there was little room for personal preference—whether one "wanted to go" or "didn't want to go." It was like being swept up in a colossal storm. Refusal was simply not an option. Should one hesitate, the neighbourhood committee matrons, schoolteachers, and Revolutionary Committee officials would pay daily visits, urging us to head for the countryside.

Under state arrangements, our cohort of educated youths was primarily assigned to Shanxi and Shaanxi. When I asked my father whether Shanxi or Shaanxi would be preferable, he replied without hesitation: "Shaanxi, of course! Northern Shaanxi is remarkably prosperous, with excellent conditions. Even the womenfolk don't labour in the fields." His impression stemmed from their time working in northern Shaanxi during a prolonged Great Leap Forward campaign that had significantly advanced agricultural development. Moreover, Nan Ni Wan had left a profound impression on him. **As the folk song goes :** "A splendid place, splendid land indeed, splendid place with splendid scenery . . . Everywhere crops abound, cattle and sheep fill the fields!" Thus he declared to me: "You absolutely must go to Northern Shaanxi."

That year, I was not yet 17, and Xiping was not yet 16. As Xiping had started school a year earlier, he was the youngest among us Beijing educated youth.

Dai Ming: Xi Jinping never abandoned reading and reflection during his time in Liangjiahe

Interview Team: Your journey from Beijing to Shaanxi now lies over forty years in the past. Do you recall the circumstances at that time?

Dai Ming: I retain some recollections, and certain details remain quite vivid. We departed on 13th January. Xi Jinping and the rest of us arrived at Beijing Station. Upon seeing the scene, my goodness! It was a sea of people, so packed you couldn't move. There were educated youths, families seeing them off, police officers, soldiers and station staff maintaining order – the entire platform was teeming with people. My parents had come to see me off, but the crowd was so dense they couldn't push their way to the front.

Our '**special train for educated youths**' could accommodate over a thousand people. As the train stood waiting to depart, our spirits were still high. With so many people seeing us off and the scene so solemn, it felt a bit like enlisting for military service – rather honourable, actually. Yet the moment the train began to move, wails erupted both on and off the carriages. It wasn't just the female educated youths weeping; the males were crying too. After all, most were teenagers who'd scarcely ever travelled far from home alone.

Years later, Xi Jinping recalled the departure scene in an interview. He said: "On that special train to Yan'an—I remember it clearly, it was January 1969—everyone was crying. There wasn't a single person on the entire train who wasn't weeping. Except me. I was laughing. My relatives gathered beneath the carriage asked, 'Why are you still laughing?' I replied, 'If I weren't leaving, that's when I'd cry. Staying here, I wouldn't even know if I'd survive. Leaving is a blessing – why should I weep?' Hearing this, they too stopped crying and broke into smiles . . ."

The "**educated youth special train**" departed from Beijing, passed through Henan, crossed the Yellow River Bridge, and followed the Longhai Railway all the way to Xi'an. Without changing trains, it continued on to Tongchuan. By the time we reached Tongchuan, it was already evening.

We rose early the next morning, ate steamed buns and pickles, then prepared to depart. By the time we set off, dawn had broken. A hundred or so lorries came to collect us. The lorries were decent enough, fitted with tarpaulins

Dai Ming: Xi Jinping never abandoned reading and reflection during his time in Liangjiahe

, dawn had broken. A hundred or so lorries came to collect us. The lorries were decent enough, fitted with tarpaulin covers to shield against wind and rain. We stowed our bundles and trunks in the cargo beds, sitting atop our luggage. Each lorry could hold over twenty people.

Xi Jinping and I boarded one such lorry. As we climbed aboard, the scene before us was truly spectacular: the convoy of trucks that had set off ahead stretched like a long dragon along the winding mountain road, dust billowing thickly, blanketing the sky. Witnessing that sight, we were all filled with excitement. But after travelling for half a day, frozen stiff and choking on dust the whole way, our excitement soon faded.

Thus, we jolted our way to Yan'an. By the time we disembarked, we were covered in dust, transformed into veritable '**dust people**'. Night had fallen, and we were housed in a school. After a day of rough travel, the educated youths were utterly exhausted. Some pushed tables together, lay down on them, and soon fell asleep. I couldn't sleep, so I found a few others to go for a stroll. Yan'an was a particularly small town back then; we'd walked around the entire place in half an hour. The tallest building in Yan'an at the time was the Xinhua Bookstore, a mere two-storey structure. The entire city lay shrouded in pitch darkness, save for a single street lamp in front of the long-distance bus station. The biting wind made the lampshade rattle and clatter, casting flickering, uncertain light. My state of mind a ~~h~~ moment was utterly indescribable— . "So this is Yan'an," I thought, feeling a chill run down my spine.

The following day, we continued our journey by lorry, travelling the 200 li from Yan'an to Yanchuan. The road was exceedingly difficult, winding endlessly along mountain passes and plateau ridges, taking us an age to traverse. On the few stretches where the road was passable and the lorry picked up speed, the bitter cold meant yellow earth constantly poured in through every crack. ~~We~~ donned our masks and ~~woollencaps~~, whatever we could. From this point, we noticed the once-long convoy of

lorries had thinned out considerably, with fewer and fewer vehicles joining us. fewer and fewer. At each stop, some vehicles would pull over, and a portion of the educated youth would disembark. Our spirits sank further with each passing vehicle. Why were there fewer and fewer trucks? Why hadn't we reached our destination yet?

Dai Ming: Xi Jinping never abandoned reading and reflection during his time in Liangjiahe

We gazed upon the desolate loess plateau, convinced we were nearing our destination. Yet after such a long journey, we found ourselves in an even more barren and impoverished land. It truly felt like we had reached the end of the world. But the truck pressed on relentlessly. Finally, all we could see was swirling yellow dust. Only a handful of trucks remained, and our spirits sank into utter despair.

Xi Jinping remained largely silent throughout the journey, and our own conversation gradually dwindled—partly from fatigue, partly from unease. We were all rather subdued. The bus kept driving on and on, seemingly never arriving. One of the educated youths aboard grew impatient, banging on the side of the vehicle and shouting at the driver "Driver, is wrong turn?" The driver replied: "I've driven this road countless times—I know it well!"

We finally arrived at Wen'anyi Commune. Upon disembarking, we noticed only a handful of trucks remained from our convoy. Immediately, the commune distributed a copy of Quotations from Chairman Mao and a white handkerchief to each of us.

After lunch, members of various production teams were already waiting for us in the commune courtyard. The person in charge read out the list: "So-and-so, from such-and-such production team," and we took our seats with the people from our respective villages. Those from Liangjiahe helped us carry our luggage and led us away.

Villagers from Liangjiahe pushed a flatbed cart to haul our bulky luggage. A dozen others shouldered our smaller belongings. The villagers treated us with such kindness, insisting we carry nothing—they bore all our luggage. We merely carried a few small items, some of us carrying nothing at all.

My own luggage consisted of a large plywood box purchased with ration tickets, packed with bedding and personal effects—a heavy load indeed. The village's strongest labourer, a lad named "Hui'er," lashed the box to his back with rope.

We made our way towards Liangjiahe. Nestled in a deep mountain valley, the narrowest parts of the gorge barely allowed the flatbed cart to pass. When we finally reached Liangjiahe, Huier

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unable to continue. When I went to retrieve my trunk, he remarked "Is this your trunk? It nearly broke my back!"

Nowadays, travelling from Beijing to Yan'an by high-speed rail takes just a few hours, allowing you to arrive the same day. Flying is even quicker, reaching Yan'an in little over an hour. From Yan'an, it's merely an hour's drive to Liangjiahe.

Interview Team: How did you settle into life after arriving in Liangjiahe? How did you adapt?

Dai Ming: Upon arriving in the village, our group of fifteen educated youths was divided into teams. Nine were assigned to Team One, also known as the "Front Team." Xi Jinping and our five were placed in Team Two, ~~女~~. The Front Team included several girls, all grouped together. Our Rear Team comprised six lads with no women. The production team leader of Liangjiahe felt the gender ratio was unbalanced, as was the number of people, and wanted to reassign us.

We found the idea of being with girls troublesome, so we told him: "It's fine, we don't want any girls!" The team leader asked: "If you don't want girls, who will cook for you?"

We retorted, "Then the brigade can assign us a cook!" The team leader pressed, "And who will award the work points for cooking?"

We retorted "Your brigade can allocate them!"

The team leader didn't argue with us and agreed. So the six of us "**baldies**" from the rear team moved into the home of Zhang Taiping, the Youth League branch secretary of Liangjiahe. Zhang Taiping was clever, articulate and capable, so the village appointed him as our landlord, thinking it would help us Beijing educated youths communicate and get along better. And indeed it did. Taiping lived in the cave dwelling next to ours.

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He'd often drop by for a chat and impart knowledge about the Youth League.

Yet mere understanding and knowledge alone proved insufficient; we still faced the practical hardships of daily life.

As Xi Jinping later recalled, overcoming the "flea crisis" remains an indelible memory for us educated youths. In northern Shaanxi, animals like cats, dogs, and pigs were riddled with fleas. These creatures would often wander into the cave dwellings, spreading fleas to humans, who then transmitted them to one another. Six of us slept on one kang bed. If one person had fleas, the other five were inevitably infected too. Sometimes during production team meetings, dozens from the entire brigade would cram into a single cave dwelling. When it became too crowded, a few more would sit outside the doorway. With people pressed tightly together, fleas and lice were bound to spread.

A flea bite would cause a welt to form, and the itching was unbearable. Scratching relentlessly would break the skin. But eventually, we grew accustomed to it and learned methods to prevent and control fleas: boiling a large pot of water to scald our clothes, killing any fleas lurking within.

At first, using the lavatory was an adjustment too. The local facilities were simply a pit dug in a corner outside the cave dwelling, enclosed by a makeshift screen. Filthy and foul-smelling, it was a wretched place to squat in winter, the biting wind making one shiver uncontrollably; in summer, swarms of flies and mosquitoes made it unbearable. Consequently, we all developed the habit of rushing through our business and escaping the lavatory as quickly as possible. Sitting on a toilet at home reading or using one's mobile for half an hour, as we do now, was unimaginable back then. Bathing was also difficult in northern Shaanxi's countryside. Showers were naturally out of the question. In winter, we'd boil some water and simply wipe ourselves down with a towel. When the weather warmed, the six of us would bathe together at the well in the valley, sparing us the trouble of carrying water back. Fetching water took over ten minutes, and as newcomers, we weren't yet skilled at carrying it. To save time, we'd wash ourselves by the well. Though wearing swimming trunks, the villagers teased us, saying young lads shouldn't be bare-bottomed. After that, we felt too embarrassed to bathe that

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convenience, we washed ourselves by the well. Though wearing swimming trunks, the villagers teased us, saying grown lads shouldn't be bare-bottomed. After that, we felt too embarrassed to bathe that way again.

The food took some getting used to as well. Still, during our first couple of days, we each ate at a local family's home, and the meals were passable. We paid them four taels of grain coupons and two mao coins, and they did their best to prepare the finest dishes, serving us things they usually wouldn't dare eat themselves. There were cornmeal buns and bean flour buns – these were already the finest and most nutritious fare available at the time. The children in the villagers' homes would watch us eat, their eyes full of envy. Of course, compared to the meals we'd had in Beijing before, it was a far cry.

Later, when we cooked for ourselves, the food deteriorated further. At sixteen or seventeen, we were still growing, yet our daily fare consisted of wild vegetable dumplings, coarse black rice gruel, and gritty cornmeal porridge – all extremely coarse and difficult to swallow. Occasionally, we might get millet rice, considered the most nutritious option. But the millet rice was so dry it felt inedible; chewing it filled our mouths with grit that refused to go down. We were often hungry. At night, lying on the heated bed, we'd talk about food, and the more we talked, the hungrier we grew.

Come the Spring Festival, the production brigade prepared several tables of fine food to welcome us, inviting the entire village to partake. That meal was truly splendid: eight large bowls, assorted dishes, and crispy fried chicken. We ate with such relish that we marvelled: "How can such delicious fare still exist in northern Shaanxi?" After the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, most villagers departed, leaving Liangjiahe with only elderly, infirm, and disabled. We wondered where everyone had gone. Soon enough, we learned: most had set out begging, walking from here to Tongchuan and Xi'an, relying on alms along the way.

Upon learning of this situation, we were profoundly shocked and deeply troubled. The villagers of Liangjiahe, who themselves struggled to feed their own families and even resorted to begging, never once treated us educated youth with disrespect.

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These experiences deepened our understanding of this land, strengthened our bonds with the villagers, and compelled us to confront the realities of society, broadening our perspective on the nation.

After Shi Chunyang's father cooked for us for a while, we began preparing our own meals. As educated youths, we received state-subsidised grain rations: forty-four jin of raw grain each month, including maize and millet. We ground the maize into grits to boil for eating. Sometimes the firewood would run out before the grits were cooked through, forcing us to eat them half-cooked. With no vegetables available, I was tasked with asking the villagers for pickled cabbage. I steeled myself to make the request. Vegetables were scarce in northern Shaanxi, and the villagers themselves struggled. Their pickled cabbage was limited, yet they would still give us some when we asked – sometimes a small bowlful. I'd bring back that small bowl of pickled cabbage, and the six of us would each get a little bit. We'd eat it with the half-cooked corn grits, just about filling our stomachs.

In later interviews, Xi Jinping recalled the pickled cabbage, saying: “Going long periods without it, I found myself quite craving it.” That's the unique memory from that time – because under those conditions, getting a single mouthful of pickled cabbage was already a profoundly happy thing.

The cornmeal porridge was often undercooked due to insufficient firewood. Gathering wood posed a real challenge for us. Villagers would sometimes venture to the cliff edges, risking their lives to chop the tough, thorny hawthorn branches. While they could climb up, we couldn't manage it. Even if we did, we couldn't handle those thorny bushes. This wood was excellent though, burning slowly and efficiently, needing little to cook a whole pot of rice. We could only gather grass from the hills, bundling it into large sheaves. Though it seemed plentiful, once placed in the stove and lit, the flames would roar and consume it within minutes. The pot wouldn't even heat up before the grass was gone. Seeing this, we realised it wouldn't do. With no fuel left for the day, we'd go hungry without a meal. So all six of us went out to gather firewood. Yet the wood we collected between us

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couldn't gather enough firewood for a single meal. The mountain truly held no substantial wood, only thin shrubs and thatch.

One morning, we stayed in bed. The team leader came to ask, "Why are you all lying here not getting up?" We replied, "We're too hungry to get out of bed." He asked, "Then why haven't you cooked?" We said, "Because there's no firewood." The team leader declared, "We must find a solution; we can't let the children starve." He then authorised us to use the corn stalks stored over winter by the brigade, which burned exceptionally well. These stalks proved invaluable; whenever we ran out of firewood, we would gather them, thus solving our fuel crisis.

During that period, we came to understand more profoundly: Northern Shaanxi was harsh, Yan'an was harsher, Yanchuan was extremely harsh, and Liangjiahe was the harshest of all.

Interview Team: After the educated youth went to the countryside, their main task was to labour alongside the commune members. What other memories do you have of the arduous work back then?

Dai Ming: During our schooling in Beijing, agricultural courses were standard. Though less strenuous, we were familiar with basic farming tools and could operate most of them. Yet in the Shaanbei countryside, they employed distinctive implements unseen by us Beijing youths. In typical plains villages, hoes suffice for ploughing and digging. But in Shaanbei, where mountain reclamation is common

坡地，有一种“老䦆”，比普通䦆头要宽很多。劳动力越强的人，用的䦆头口越宽，受力面积越大，翻出的土越多，但是所耗费的力气也
the greater the effort required.

The carrying poles in northern Shaanxi also differed from those we were accustomed to. With timber scarce in the region, breaking such an essential tool meant losing a valuable piece of wood. Consequently, the locals would

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add an extra piece of wood in the middle to reinforce it. This makes the carrying pole heavier.

Northern Shaanxi also employs flails for threshing, though this implement exists elsewhere. We encountered none during our agricultural studies in Beijing. Operated by swinging the flail to harness momentum, it separates grain from husks. Here, women predominantly use it for threshing wheat. When threshing wheat, they would line up in rows, their movements synchronised. A whole row of flails would come down together in perfect unison. The threshing floor would be filled with dust and bustling with activity. We educated youths would marvel, wondering why no dance artist had ever captured this labour scene. It wasn't until we joined the others in the threshing line that we realised how physically demanding the work truly was. We had to strive to keep pace with everyone else; otherwise, we would slow down the entire team.

From mastering the tools to gradually increasing the labour intensity, farm work truly proved a difficult **hurdle to overcome**. If it was challenging enough for us seventeen or eighteen-year-olds, it was an even greater test for the fifteen or sixteen-year-old Xi Jinping.

At first, we strained ourselves to no avail, while the commune members performed their tasks swiftly and efficiently. Their familiarity with these labours made all the difference.

Though we weren't much good at farm work, the locals here were genuinely kind-hearted and treated us city folk very well. At midday, we'd eat our meals right by the fields. The food they brought us would be polished off in just a few mouthfuls. The villagers were ever so concerned about us and would ask "Have you had enough to eat?" We educated youth would reply "We're nearly full!" Then the villagers would bring out dried sweet potatoes to share with us saying "If you're still hungry, have a little something to tide you over." We hadn't eaten our fill, so we accepted them and ate while asking "We've eaten yours, what about you?" The villager replied "The dog ate them! The dog ate them!" We looked at each other, puzzled by the meaning. Some educated youths joked "He's cursing you, calling you dogs!" Later we learned that

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in Liangjiahe dialect, the pronunciation of '**'dog' and 'enough'**' is remarkably similar. The villager ~~He~~ had "enough to eat." We educated youths and the villagers all burst out laughing together.

During breaks from dam-building, the village's young and strong labourers would wrestle with us educated youths. Xi Jinping often wrestled too, having grappled with many of the village youths. We Beijing youths had the height advantage, while the rural youths possessed greater strength and experience, so the matches were evenly matched. During that period, through working and playing together, we got along exceptionally well.

The villagers knew we weren't skilled in farm work, but they encouraged us greatly as long as we worked hard. During labour, if you could keep up with their pace, they'd say "Good lad! Come to my house for dinner today!" One day, I worked particularly well, and "Hui'er's" father said to me: "Dai Ming, come to my house for dinner today!"

Interview Team: Could you share some details or amusing anecdotes from daily life?

Dai Ming: Shortly after arriving in Liangjiahe, we encountered an amusing incident involving a wedding night prank.

We hadn't been staying at Zhang Taiping's house long when he married. His family held a celebration, and the whole village came to congratulate them. Life was poor back then, so weddings weren't as lavish as they are now. After eating, drinking, and offering their congratulations, the villagers all left.

We thought the festivities were over, but then a young lad from the village ~~named~~ "Stone" came to our cave dwelling and said "There'll be a wedding night prank tonight!"

We asked "How do you play the bridal chamber prank?"

Stone explained "Tonight we'll go to their new chamber to 'eavesdrop'. Listen in on their private whispers. When they get annoyed by the disturbance, they'll offer treats to the eavesdroppers. That's how the fun unfolds - ^^\n

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We had agreed that if we weren't too tired that night, we'd join in the wedding night pranks; if we fell asleep, well, that would be that. Come evening, however, the whole village turned up to celebrate. They picked at the paper covering the windows of Taiping's cave dwelling, tearing a gaping hole with a sharp 'riiiip!' Taiping shouted from inside "Who's there? Who's there?" Outside, the crowd cackled and jeered. We were staying in the cave next door, and the racket kept us awake. Yang Jingsheng egged us on "Go join the fun! They're handing out snacks!" Being famished in the dead of night, the prospect of food excited us. "We ought to give it a go," we agreed. Upon emerging from our cave dwelling and peering next door, we saw Zhang Taiping's window paper was already riddled with holes, nearly torn to shreds. Zhang Taiping had no choice but to pull out a mosquito net to cover the window. Inside the cave dwelling, it was pitch black, not even a kerosene lamp to be seen. We joined in the racket outside for a while, but didn't manage to get any food. We'll just have to count that as having played our part in the wedding night pranks.

Another incident left a deep impression on me. When we first arrived in Liangjiahe, the production team proposed: "You lads aren't exactly seasoned at farm work yet. But regardless of how well you perform, as long as you put in the effort—results aside—each of you will get 8 points."

At the time, the village women averaged 8.5 points. We were lower than the women, which we found hard to swallow. We went to the team leader to argue our case "After all, we're all young lads. Our skills may be lacking, but we've got strength. Being half a point lower than the women is simply unacceptable" The team leader was quite reasonable.

replied "Very well, you shall have 8.5 points too."

But in reality, we still only received 6.5 points daily. This, however, was not the team leader's fault, only ourselves for being lazy. Of the daily 8.5 points, 2 points came from early morning work. But the early shift started far too early—we had to be at work by four in the morning, and we simply couldn't drag ourselves out of bed then.

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Yet we still wanted those two points. The captain retorted "You didn't turn up for the early shift—how can I give you those points?"

I retorted "You never call us. Next time you summon us for work in the morning, we'll earn our points."

The team leader replied "Very well, I'll call you tomorrow." Back in Beijing, even those living far from school rose at half past six, while those nearer got up at seven – we were generally well rested. Rising at four o'clock was utterly unbearable. It was winter then, and sleepiness was already a struggle. At four o'clock, it was still pitch dark, with stars and moon still visible in the sky.

Interview Team: Did the team leader come to call you for the early work shift? What

happened next? Dai Ming: The next morning, the team leader did come to call us. His cave dwelling was separated from ours by a

If he'd walked around the gully, it would've been a long way and taken ages. So he stood on the opposite bank and shouted towards our cave dwellings:

"Jingsheng—woo—"

"Dai Ming'er—woo—" In this terrain of northern Shaanxi—the Loess Plateau, carved by water erosion — gullies crisscross the landscape. Thus, people often hail one another across distances. When calling out, locals employ a nasalised "-er" sound, a high pitch, and drawn-out tones, making their voices carry remarkably well. The folk ballads of Northern Shaanxi likely evolved from this practice. Moreover, they would add a drawn-out "oh—" after the long vowels, making their voices even more penetrating.

Yet after the team leader called out for some time, there was no response from our cave dwelling. We were all fast asleep at the time. After a short while, the team leader called again:

"Jingping—oh—"

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"Yansheng—oh—" After finishing, the captain stood there dumbfounded for a moment, yet still no response from our cave dwelling. He called again:

''Jianing—oh—''

"Pingsheng—Ooh—'' . . . ''

The captain strained his voice, calling out each of our six names in turn. His voice was exceptionally loud and piercing. I was in the midst of a dream when I was roused by the shouts.

I opened my eyes to utter darkness "Blimey, what's that noise?" I said. ~~Xi Jinping~~ had also woken "Sounds like the squad leader calling out," he remarked "Is he rousing us for breakfast?" I asked Wang Yansheng piped up "What time is it?"

Yang Jingsheng replied "Just past three." I muttered "Sleep, sleep, sleep! Ignore him!"

So we lay back down to sleep. The foreman was still shouting our names in turn from the other side of the ditch, but we just pulled our quilts over our heads and carried on sleeping.

When we met the team leader at dawn for work, his face was ashen. I deliberately teased, "Well! Team Leader, why didn't you call us? We've missed the morning shift!"

The captain replied in a hoarse, indignant voice "Didn't call you? I nearly lost my breath shouting! This captain was exceptionally kind to us educated youths. He led us in labour, taught us production techniques, and

took great care of our daily lives. Sadly, he passed away long ago. Later, when we educated youth got in touch with each other and recalled this incident, we laughed heartily while also reflecting on our youthful naivety back then, and the sincerity and generosity shown by the villagers of Liangjiahe towards us Beijing youngsters. Another time, we were heading up the mountain from our lodgings, crossing a ridge and descending into a valley to reach Yiluohe Village. There were over a dozen educated youths in this village. As the ratio of males to females was roughly equal, they formed two teams. One team comprised entirely of girls, all members of the school choir; the other team consisted solely of boys,

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who couldn't sing at all. Every evening, the Yiluohe girls would sing beautifully, and the boys living opposite, feeling challenged, would respond with their own songs. But these lads knew no other tune than "Two Tigers"— "Twotigers,twotigers,runningfast,runningfast." Whatever the girls sang, they countered with this tune. Whenever the girls encountered them, they teased them playfully "You country bumpkins! Can't sing a proper song, only know 'Two Tigers'. Don't bother singing with us anymore"•

That day, all six of us turned out to back up the male educated youths. Xi Jinping didn't usually sing much, but that day he joined in with us, and he had quite a loud voice. We started with "The Hawthorn Tree" and stunned the girls opposite. They were puzzled—how had these lads suddenly become so skilled? So they pulled out their real talent, performing a duet that was truly beautiful. This, in turn, drowned us out. I said "Don't panic, I've got my 200 Foreign Folk Songs with me"• I handed the book to the Yiluo River boys and said "Have a look at this! Do you read music?" They exclaimed "Oh my, this is a treasure! We read music! We read music"• We often leafed through this book, so we knew several songs inside out. That night, we sang one after another: "Lights,Revolution,Katyusha," and "Moscow Nights" all night long. We belted out the tunes at the top of our lungs, yet somehow managed to stay mostly in tune. We kept singing until the girls across the way fell silent—whether they were stunned into silence or had simply fallen asleep, we couldn't tell.

Interview Team: Could you elaborate on your impressions of Xi Jinping back then?

Dai Ming During the period of being sent down to the countryside, Xi Jinping was a rather steady individual with strong resilience. This resilience wasn't just about coping with the pressures of daily life or physical demands, but also the immense psychological strain

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Comrade Xi Zhongxun, his father, was persecuted, subjected to criticism sessions, and sent down to Henan. His mother was also living under scrutiny at the time. As for Xi Jinping himself, his background classification as the "son of a counter-revolutionary" meant that the two primary avenues for us educated youth—enlistment and recruitment—were virtually impossible for him. Consequently, he bore a psychological burden far heavier than any of us, and faced far greater difficulties.

Our family sent us parcels and money, whereas Xi Jinping's household, due to their circumstances, provided him with considerably less '**support**'. Yet Xi Jinping was not one to share his personal hardships with us; he never complained or lamented his situation, instead keeping these matters to himself. This reveals what an exceptionally resilient individual he is, never yielding to adversity.

He was also a man of unwavering resolve. Once he conceived an idea or developed a plan, he would meticulously study it and see it through to completion. Later, when he became Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Village and led the villagers in constructing biogas pits and establishing ironworks and sewing cooperatives, I was not at all surprised. For during the time I lived alongside him, I had observed his tenacious drive and fierce ambition.

We would occasionally visit the earthen dwellings of educated youths in neighbouring villages. Bored and hungry, we'd often plot where to scrounge a meal. "Let's go to Liangjiata and eat their food!" we'd urge. But Xi wouldn't join us. He'd sit reading, saying "I'll pass. Bring me some back if you manage to get any."

On the one hand, he disliked participating in such pursuits; on the other, ~~hated~~ reading and study during that period. When he came across a book he liked, he would read it cover to cover; when he encountered a matter he didn't understand

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he would study it thoroughly. At the time, I didn't think much of it, but looking back now, for a fifteen or sixteen-year-old lad, while his peers were out playing, he could sit with an empty stomach, calmly reading, studying, and thinking. That truly required considerable self-discipline, a strong thirst for knowledge, and an ambitious drive.

Interview Team: Drawing on your own experience, could you discuss how the period of being sent down to Liangjiahe as a rural worker influenced you?

Dai Ming: People's experiences differ, their thoughts diverge, and consequently, the paths they ultimately take vary. Xi Jinping's seven years of rural placement in Liangjiahe laid a solid foundation for his understanding of society and the people. Through manual labour, he grasped the hardships endured by impoverished working people. At that time, the farmers' hope and demand was simply to have enough to eat. The hardships of their lives were almost unimaginable to us in Beijing. Without this experience of being sent down to the countryside, it would have been difficult for us to see the true situation in the villages and to understand the reality of farmers' lives. I spent a year and a half in Liangjiahe, while Xi Jinping stayed for over seven years. This period of life in the rural production brigade had a profound impact on my entire life, and one can only imagine the impact it had on Xi Jinping.

Our journey as educated youth to the countryside began in response to Chairman Mao's call, driven by a simple class consciousness and our devotion to Chairman Mao — "heeding Chairman Mao's words". Once there, we had to integrate with this land and its people; we truly had to rely on them. They taught us how to labour and helped us with our daily lives. If we failed to build good relationships with the villagers, life would become extremely difficult. Thus, during our time in the countryside, we gradually developed this awareness: we must rely on the villagers, get along well with them, and do our utmost to serve our fellow villagers.

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. Otherwise, our rural placement would be meaningless, and our future prospects would be bleak. The villagers of Northern Shaanxi treated Xi Jinping exceptionally well. While other places rejected him, Northern Shaanxi embraced him,

and showed him no discrimination whatsoever. Throughout Xi Jinping's time in the countryside, local cadres and villagers consistently helped him overcome this disadvantageous situation. It was during these years in Liangjiahe that Xi Jinping shed the label of "**child of a counter-revolutionary**," gradually evolving into a "child who could be educated." This laid a crucial foundation for his subsequent admission to the Communist Party, his appointment as village Party secretary, and his acceptance into Tsinghua University. It is no exaggeration to say that Xi Jinping and the people of Northern Shaanxi shared a bond akin to family.

During our time in the countryside, the villagers offered us selfless assistance and guidance. Conversely, we educated youth also brought them many useful things: our books, our scientific knowledge, and the novel concepts we shared with them... This played a certain role in transforming the rural landscape and shifting the mindset of our fellow villagers.

In just over a year as Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Village, Xi Jinping brought about substantial changes to this impoverished and backward hamlet. Villagers not only had sufficient food and warm clothing, but also gained access to biogas for cooking and lighting, irrigation wells, an ironworks cooperative, a sewing cooperative, a retail outlet, and a mill... What had once been a destitute hamlet where villagers would collectively go out begging during lean seasons, under Xi Jinping's leadership over a year, had become a thriving, vibrant community. Thus, when Xi Jinping was to leave Liangjiahe and return to Beijing, the villagers were reluctant to part with him, and the entire village turned out to see him off.

Throughout those arduous years in Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping never relinquished his commitment to reading and reflection. Both Xi Jinping and I had studied the same book: Fan Wenlan's Concise History of China. Though titled "**Concise**," it comprised four substantial volumes. We both read it thoroughly from cover to cover. For me, it was essentially an act of reading—gaining historical understanding and enriching my knowledge.

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For Xi Jinping, however, it sparked reflection, provided lessons, and prompted critical analysis. It can be said that his governance philosophy and his thinking crystallised through this persistent commitment to reading.

Practically speaking, Xi Jinping gained much from his time in Liangjiahe. He later returned to Beijing for advanced studies at Tsinghua University. After graduation, he worked successively at the State Council and in the military before voluntarily returning to grassroots work—progressing from county to city, prefecture, province, and finally to the central government. Over decades of such down-to-earth endeavour, he never severed ties with the grassroots. What the grassroots people think, what they yearn for, what problems they face, what difficulties each level encounters, and what work is needed to change the status quo... These tasks were far more complex than the challenges he faced in Liangjiahe, but their essence remained the same: whatever the people need, whatever they wish to do, the cadres must lead them in doing it. After Xi Jinping was elected General Secretary of the Party, he emphasised a people-centred development philosophy, rooted in his understanding of grassroots communities and their realities.

Having endured the years as an educated youth, even the most arduous days no longer felt arduous. In subsequent times, whenever life improved slightly, he felt profoundly content.

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Interviewee: Shi Chunyang (nickname: Suiwa), villager of Liangjiahe, born in 1954. Following Xi Jinping's departure from Liangjiahe in October 1975, Shi Chunyang succeeded him as village Party branch secretary. In 2016, he assumed the role of Party General Branch Secretary of Daliangjiahe.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview date: 27 February 2016

Location of Interview: Liangjiahe Village Committee, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

Interview Team: Comrade Shi Chunyang, hello! During Xi Jinping's time working in Liangjiahe, you laboured alongside him. After he left Liangjiahe, you succeeded him as village Party secretary. When did you first meet Xi Jinping?

Shi Chunyang: In January 1969, I went to Wen'anyi Commune to receive the Beijing educated youth. It was at this time that I first met Xi Jinping.

At that time, Liangjiahe sent over a dozen strong young members to receive the educated youths. Fearing we might be short-handed, we also brought mules to help carry the luggage. The youths had bundles of bedding and trunks. We took turns helping with the luggage—you'd carry a load, then I'd carry a load—and dozens of us returned to the village in a grand procession.

I recall distinctly that fifteen Beijing educated youths arrived in Liangjiahe Village: eleven males and four females. The village committee reception room was located in the first brigade, where five male and four female youths were assigned. Xi Jinping and the remaining five males were placed in the second brigade at the rear. The village arranged for my father to cook for the second brigade youths.

Interview Team: As educated youths from the capital city of Beijing, could they adapt to rural life? Shi

Chunyang: It was extremely difficult at first. Xi Jinping and his peers had grown up in the capital city of Beijing, where they had encountered many people and seen much of the world. Arriving in our impoverished mountain hollow, living in earthen cave dwellings, labouring in the fields with their faces to the yellow earth and their backs to the sky, sharing meals and lodgings with us illiterate peasants – naturally, they found it difficult to adjust. In the countryside, the food was poor, unpalatable and insufficient. They used filthy latrines – freezing in winter, stinking in summer, swarming with flies and mosquitoes. Sleeping was also a hardship: several youths would lie in a row, crammed onto a single heated bed.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping

delivers

Such a harsh life, such a stark contrast to what they were used to—to say they adapted immediately was clearly unrealistic. We peasants were

born of the yellow earth, growing our food in it, digging cave dwellings to live in,

so we were perpetually covered in yellow dust and paid it no mind. The young villagers, having befriended the Beijing educated youths, would often visit their cave dwellings. Upon entering, they'd plonk themselves on the kang, scattering dust across the quilts and pillows. Some individuals, particularly lacking in personal hygiene, would bring bedbugs along with them when they climbed onto the kang.

Xi worked the fields daily, often covered in yellow dust, and gradually grew accustomed to it. Having lived in Beijing before, he'd never been bitten by lice. When he first arrived in Liangjiahe, his legs were frequently covered in large, red, swollen patches from lice bites, intensely itchy. He scratched them constantly, eventually scratching until they bled and oozed pus. When labouring in the fields, everyone rolled up their trouser legs. I could see his shins covered in red welts from lice bites – some scabbed over, others still oozing blood where the scabs had been scratched off. After a while, Xi Jinping grew immune to the lice, developing resistance to their toxins like us rural folk. Even when bitten, the swelling and redness became less severe.

Interview Team: Did Xi Jinping grow increasingly familiar with the villagers? Please describe his daily life and labour.

Shi Chunyang: It didn't take long for Xi Jinping to adapt to rural life in northern Shaanxi. Two years later, when most of the Beijing educated youth returned to the city, Xi Jinping had practically become one of our own. Whether it was old men, young lads, children, or womenfolk, he could chat with everyone.

Not only was he well-travelled and knowledgeable, but he also possessed an easygoing nature. His speech was neither extreme nor conservative, but down-to-earth, which made us particularly fond of chatting with him. Especially in the evenings, we young folk would often drop by his cave dwelling. He would tell us about Beijing, about China, about the wider world

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

and recounted many things we had never heard of before, broadening the horizons of us mountain folk. He loved reading, whereas most in our village were illiterate. He would often share knowledge from books with us, sparking a keen interest in reading and literacy.

But Xi Jinping didn't just lecture us; he also sought our insights on rural life. He inquired in detail about farming practices, crop cultivation, and all aspects of village affairs, and we were always happy to share our knowledge.

When it came to labour, Xi Jinping put in tremendous effort. The educated youths were initially poor workers, so they were each given 6 work points daily. Xi Jinping worked tirelessly, steadily increasing his points from 6 to 7, 8, 9,

10 points... Ten points represented a full day's labour points for an able-bodied rural worker.

Due to his outstanding work ethic and strong rapport with fellow villagers, Tao Haisu, the county Youth League secretary, recognised his capabilities and assigned him to conduct a six-month-long social education campaign in Zhaojiahe. Shortly after his return to Liangjiahe, he was appointed Party branch secretary of our village.

Interview Team: Why did the village elect Xi Jinping as Party branch

secretary at that time? Shi Chunyang: I believe there were several reasons.

He was educated, thoughtful, resourceful, and quick-witted. Few in our village could read at the time, so we needed someone literate to lead affairs, hence Xi Jinping's selection.

He worked exceptionally hard, capable of performing tasks on par with the strongest labourers in our village. In those days, leading cadres had to lead by example in hardship. During routine labour, Xi worked harder than any of us ordinary members. Such a person in a leadership role commanded genuine respect.

He got on splendidly with our villagers, fostering warm relationships and a strong grassroots support base. Everyone liked him, was happy to chat with him, and listened attentively to what he had to say.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

Xi Jinping was a man of responsibility and action, always prioritising the village's interests. Even before becoming Party Secretary, he had numerous plans and ideas for the village. Building dams, constructing terraced fields, digging wells, increasing grain yields – these were matters he constantly contemplated and discussed with the villagers. At that time, some of the older villagers were rather conservative and resistant to new ideas. Xi Jinping would engage them in discussions, easily persuading them and effectively leading the team.

During the Socialist Education Movement, he handled both major and minor affairs in Zhaojiahe Village, accumulating valuable work experience.

Moreover, as an educated youth from Beijing, he maintained neutrality among the various surnames and clans in our rural community. He acted fairly and impartially, favouring no one, which earned him the trust of all.

Xi Jinping was also very willing to take on the role of village Party secretary. Although it was arduous and exhausting, he did not mind. He sincerely wanted to do something for Liangjiahe.

Interview Team: Could you elaborate on the specific initiatives Xi Jinping undertook after becoming village Party secretary?

Shi Chunyang: The first major undertaking after Xi Jinping took office was establishing biogas facilities. He travelled to Mianyang in Sichuan to study biogas tank construction techniques. Upon returning, he adapted the methods to our local climate in Yanchuan, conducting research and overseeing construction. He excavated a biogas pit beside the courtyard where the educated youth resided, lining it with cement to form a tank. Despite encountering setbacks, the biogas tank was ultimately completed, resolving our local fuel shortage.

Following the widespread adoption of biogas, Liangjiahe lit the first biogas lamp in northern Shaanxi. We could use biogas for cooking and lighting, while the fertiliser extracted from the biogas pits could be used to fertilise crops – achieving multiple benefits at once.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

Xi established an ironworks cooperative in our village. Noting that some members possessed blacksmithing skills, he built a small workshop where ~~could~~ forge agricultural tools in exchange for labour points. Villagers no longer needed to travel to the county seat for implements; they could simply visit the ironworks. This addressed local tool requirements and greatly facilitated daily life.

Xi Jinping also established a sales agency for our village. A round trip to Wen'anyi Commune covered over seventy li of winding roads, taking a full day's journey. Even fetching a single barrel of kerosene required setting off at dawn. After purchasing supplies in Wen'anyi, grabbing a bite to eat, and resting, the return journey to Liangjiahe meant the sun was nearly setting by the time we arrived. Without hurrying, we'd miss supper.

Xi Jinping convened a village meeting "It's terribly inconvenient for our villagers to spend a whole day travelling just to buy something. For essentials like kerosene, we could easily bring back a portion of goods from Wen'anyi Supply and Marketing Cooperative for centralised sales here. We'd then settle accounts with them periodically based on the order list." The villagers agreed this was indeed a sound solution: sending one or two people with donkeys to Wen'anyi to bring back daily necessities would spare the entire village the back-and-forth journey. Everyone strongly supported the idea, urging its swift implementation.

Xinping wasted no time, leading the villagers to establish the agency point with utmost speed. This agency point stocked nearly all the daily necessities required by the members, including kerosene, matches, soap, salt, sweets, and so forth.

Interview Team: While Xi Jinping's establishment of the ironworks and agency point served to benefit the masses, was such small-scale collective enterprise permitted under the policies of that era?

Shi Chunyang: Within the prevailing political and economic climate, where grain production was the overriding national priority, Xi Jinping's pursuit of these supplementary ventures carried inherent risks. He could easily have been labelled as deviant.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

Therefore, as a rule, village officials preferred to steer clear of such matters, neither inquiring into them nor engaging in these sideline ventures. Moreover, the rigid system of the time made pursuing such supplementary activities far from straightforward. The agricultural by-products companies and supply and marketing cooperatives were state-run entities, and collaborating with them was no simple matter. For us peasants, with our unclear and vague circumstances, dealing with them was difficult. Xi Jinping was only twenty at the time. He was someone who had the common people in his heart and possessed a pioneering spirit. He overcame the difficulties and ultimately succeeded in getting things done.

Xi Jinping maintained rigorous adherence to policy. The ironworks provided agricultural tools and repairs to villagers without profit, entirely free of charge. He personally secured contracts to supply goods to the county. Our Liangjiahe Village Party Branch conducted business with the county agricultural products company on an official basis, which posed no issues. The agency sales point also operated on a non-profit basis. Xi Jinping would first arrange credit terms with the supply and marketing cooperative **to "wholesale" goods** back, then sell them to members at cost price, earning not a penny. This provided convenience for members' livelihoods, did not conflict with the policies of the time, and was entirely above board.

The Ironworks and the agency point brought tangible benefits to the village. In modern parlance, this constituted "**optimising logistics and integrating resources**". At the time, Xi Jinping appointed the blacksmith to oversee the Ironworks Cooperative, enabling him to "put his skills to practical use." By forging iron daily, he earned labour points and was exempted from fieldwork. He also appointed a young female member named Shi Fenglan as the sales agent. Being educated and adept at accounting, she earned labour points by selling daily necessities each day, similarly avoiding field labour.

Though each managed a separate stall, this arrangement—which might appear to waste two labourers—actually saved other members time they would otherwise spend travelling to Wen'anyi Commune to repair tools, collect kerosene, or purchase daily necessities. This freed up time for them to work in the fields and earn labour points. Able-bodied workers could earn 10 points daily, with a maximum

12 points. These labour points were closely tied to daily life, exchangeable for grain or money. It could be said that the farmers' entire livelihood depended on these points. Thus, Xi Jinping's agency sales points

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

did not contravene policy, but was a genuinely beneficial and convenient service for the people.

Over the course of just two years, Xi Jinping implemented numerous such practical and beneficial initiatives.

He established a sewing cooperative, organising the women of our village to collectively produce garments. In rural life, constant labour causes clothes to wear out quickly; garments would tear after little use, requiring frequent mending. Only when utterly worn would new clothes be made. Those who sewed at home, like unmarried men, often did a poor job and could not make new garments at all. After a day's labour, night would fall, and the women folk would still toil by dim oil lamps, threading needles and sewing—an arduous task. Following Xi Jinping's establishment of the sewing cooperative, members would hand over garments needing mending to the women working there.

The women earned work points based on the quantity of garments mended daily. Other members, freed from sewing chores, could dedicate more time to labour and accumulate additional points. This equitable system proved popular. By harnessing individual strengths, Xi Jinping orchestrated the village's production and daily life with remarkable efficiency.

After assuming the role of Party Secretary, Xi proposed liberating labour from household chores to focus on grain production. To this end, he established a mill where members could grind their own flour. Previously, villagers used stone mills, harnessing donkeys and requiring an additional labourer to turn the millstone. The donkey would turn the millstone round and round, while another person had to sweep the grain into the mill with a broom. It was time-consuming and laborious, yielding little flour in a long while.

Machinery is truly remarkable—a thousand donkeys couldn't match its efficiency. A single diesel-powered mill, operated by just one person, handled all the village's milling needs – swiftly and efficiently. The mill offered its services free of charge to villagers, not charging a penny; even the diesel fuel for the engine was paid for by the collective. This not only freed up human labour but also liberated the donkeys. These newly freed productive forces could then be channelled into agricultural production.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

Establishing biogas facilities, ironworks cooperatives, retail outlets, sewing cooperatives, mills... Within a year or two of Xi Jinping serving as our village Party secretary, these initiatives resembled the social security system our nation now builds. The government provides multifaceted safeguards and welfare—education, security, healthcare, public services—not for profit, but to tangibly address people's daily needs, freeing them from anxieties. When people live happily, free from the struggle to meet basic needs, they can channel more wisdom and strength into national development. As the nation grows prosperous and strong, the people gain greater security and welfare, creating a virtuous cycle.

Interview Team: What distinctive qualities do you believe Xi Jinping demonstrated as village Party secretary?

Shi Chunyang: The primary reason we elected Xi Jinping as village Party secretary was his fairness, sense of responsibility, and ability to connect genuinely with the people. He addressed whatever the villagers needed. Every action and decision he made was pragmatic and prioritised the interests of the people.

Putting oneself in others' shoes may sound simple, but it is far from easy to practise. It requires officials to possess genuine sincerity, along with considerable experience and skill in problem-solving.

When Xi Jinping first became Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Village, we received a consignment of relief grain allocated by higher authorities. The village Party branch was delighted to receive it, but when it came to distributing the grain, everyone claimed their family faced hardship and sought a larger share. It wasn't that our villagers were dishonest; it was simply that poverty was so severe at the time, and when it came to filling stomachs, no one would yield. During the village meeting to resolve this, the discussion soon descended into heated arguments.

Xi Jinping declared "Enough shouting. Let us visit every household immediately. We shall see clearly how much grain each possesses. Who deserves more, who less—it will be plain for all to see."

With that, Xi Jinping rose and led the group to inspect every household, recording each family's grain reserves publicly.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

, recording the quantities publicly. From past ten o'clock at night until five in the morning, they ascertained each household's grain reserves without delay. The meeting's conclusion seamlessly transitioned into the household inspections, leaving no opportunity for anyone to cheat. There was no chance to slip home and hide ~~in~~ full view of the others. After the inspections, the household with the least grain received the largest share. There was no room for complaint; this was the fairest resolution.

Later, when discussing the matter, people remarked that only Xi Jinping, as village Party secretary, would dare implement such a measure. Under any other secretary, it would be unthinkable, and even if attempted, the villagers might not comply.

When Xi Jinping served as our village Party secretary, he truly stood apart. He adhered to facts, spoke fairly, acted justly, and took responsibility for his decisions. Take the construction of our village's largest silt dam, for instance. Some conservative elders opposed it, but Xi Jinping patiently worked through their concerns, enlisting Wang Xianping's help to persuade them. Through thorough ideological work, he won everyone's trust. Ultimately, the dam was completed, facilitating irrigation and boosting crop yields. Once the tangible results emerged, everyone's mindset shifted. Consequently, our villagers hold him in high regard and heed his every word.

Interview Team: When Xi Jinping went to university in Beijing, why did he entrust you with the responsibility of Party Secretary in Liangjiahe Village? How did the handover take place?

Shi Chunyang: I believe Xi Jinping recommended me for the role because he recognised my capacity for hard work and my fair-minded approach. Moreover, I was young and capable at the time, wholly dedicated to the village's interests. Without these qualities, Xi Jinping would not have chosen me as his successor.

Xinping became village Party secretary in 1974. Shortly after taking office, he selected me as brigade leader and member of the Party branch committee.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

In the spring of 1975, during a Party members' meeting, Xi Jinping announced the addition of a deputy secretary: Suiwa. By March or April, delegations from neighbouring townships began arriving at Liangjiahe for biogas training sessions, involving numerous tasks like field demonstrations and symposiums. Xi Jinping remarked then: "If you'll handle meetings with visiting townships from now on. I'm too busy to manage them myself."

Throughout this period, I was so caught up in the hustle and bustle that I didn't have time to think much about it. At the time, I didn't even realise that Xi Jinping was deliberately grooming me.

Xi Jinping returned to Beijing in 1975 to attend university. Most educated youths sent to endure hardship in our remote mountain village might have thought, "At last, I'm leaving this poverty-stricken place. I'll never come back." But Xi Jinping was different. As his departure approached, he found himself unable to let go of many village matters. He kept seeking me out to discuss them.

Once, when I visited his cave dwelling he said to me "Who shall take over as Party Secretary?" I replied "That's hard to say. Whoever the people choose will be the one." Xi Jinping said "I'm not fit for it. I couldn't manage." He countered "Why couldn't you? I hadn't done it before either, and now I'm doing rather well, aren't I?" I said "I fear I wouldn't do it well." Xi Jinping retorted, "You haven't even tried yet. How can you know you wouldn't do it well?"

A few days later, Xi Jinping convened a meeting of all Party members. He addressed the gathering "My time here is nearly up. We must elect my successor as Party Secretary. I personally recommend Suiwa."

Voting commenced immediately. Each person received a slip of paper to cast their vote. Everyone wrote "Suiwa" on theirs. This outcome wasn't because I was particularly good, but because our villagers trusted Xi Jinping. He recommended me, so everyone voted for me.

On the eve of Xi Jinping's departure from Liangjiahe, he gathered the entire village for a farewell meeting. He addressed them "During my seven years here in Liangjiahe, I have learnt much. If Liangjiahe

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers selflessly accepted and supported me, enabling me to integrate into society here—to join the League, the Party, and become village Party secretary. From here, I set off to return to the city for university. All that Liangjiahe has given me, I shall never forget for the rest of my life."

He then addressed the assembly—and by extension, myself and the entire village Party committee—with these words: "To lead a village well, one must treat all equally. The people value nothing more than fairness and trust nothing more than those who act justly. Even in matters of a single penny, if you handle it unfairly, the people will not accept it; in matters of ten yuan, if you handle it fairly, the people will have no complaints. Whether it's a major or minor matter, you must handle it as it should be handled." Then, addressing me publicly, he said:

"Suíwá, Liangjiahe must develop in the future, and you must set an example. a model and take the lead. As a young person, once you become secretary, you must think deeply, consider issues thoroughly, and maintain close ties with the people. Only then can you do your job well and be a good Party secretary. If you handle matters without considering the people's feelings, you won't be a good Party secretary either."

Interview Team: Did you feel significant psychological pressure after becoming village Party secretary?

Shi Chunyang: The pressure was immense, primarily because Xi Jinping set such a high benchmark. Maintaining that standard proved exceptionally challenging.

At the time, I lacked experience in managing the entire village. As deputy secretary, I didn't need to deliberate much—I simply carried out Xi Jinping's instructions. Whenever I faced decisions beyond my capacity, I could consult him directly. After Xi Jinping left, our village felt adrift without its anchor, and I had to make decisions independently.

It was the era of the planned economy—matters were numerous and difficult to manage. The village Party branch made all decisions regarding production and daily life. If grain yields fell short, villagers would genuinely go hungry. The responsibility for food rations was immense, and the pressure on the village Party secretary was immense. Only after taking office did I truly appreciate how difficult Xi Jinping's role had been.

truly faced.

The honours Xi Jinping earned must be preserved. During his tenure, Xi Jinping led our entire village in establishing biogas production, making us a model for biogas development across Yanchuan County. Now that he's gone and I've taken over, if we were to suddenly cease being a model—or worse, become laggards—I couldn't bear the shame. I'd have no way to account for it to the villagers. Therefore, I dared not slacken my efforts not only in agricultural production and infrastructure development, but also in biogas production. Field demonstrations of biogas production continued unabated, ensuring visiting delegations from other townships could learn **the "true techniques."** This was a matter of county-wide science popularisation that demanded my utmost attention. In practice, we encountered numerous challenges. In northern Shaanxi, winter temperatures can plummet to minus 20°C. If the liquid inside the biogas digester freezes, the walls risk cracking. Once cracked, the digester leaks water and ceases gas production.

We devised every possible method to insulate the biogas tanks during winter, covering them with straw. Come spring, we would remove the insulation layer and inspect the tanks for leaks. Should any be found, we would reseal them with concrete slurry.

In Liangjiahe, we used biogas for cooking, boiling water, and evening lighting... for over a decade. It wasn't until 1987, when electricity reached our village, that the biogas digester finally retired from service.

Interview Team: Did you maintain contact with Xi Jinping after he left Liangjiahe?

Shi Chunyang: Xi Jinping has always maintained ties with Liangjiahe, mostly through correspondence, though he has returned several times. Each visit, he would inquire about the most basic living conditions of the villagers; the people's welfare was his foremost concern. Several letters he wrote to us are now displayed in the village history museum, so everyone can see how much he cared for us.

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

In 1993, whilst working in Fujian, he made time to return to Liangjiahe to visit his fellow villagers. The villagers welcomed him with great joy, all inviting him to dine at their homes. Fearing he might trouble them, he instead ate at our village canteen. Xi Jinping also brought tea and time-telling clocks for our village, ensuring every household received one. At that time, most people did not own wristwatches, so the clocks he provided were exceptionally practical, serving both to tell the time and to chime the hour.

By 2009, Xi Jinping had risen to become a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Vice President of the State. During a research visit to Yan'an, he invited several former Liangjiahe villagers to meet him there, including myself. As soon as I stepped off the vehicle, Xi spotted me and addressed me directly by my childhood nickname "Suiwa, you've come!" He shook my hand warmly and introduced me to the comrades accompanying him.

During the symposium, I had prepared a speech and intended to read from it. When it came to my turn to speak, I had barely begun with the opening line "Esteemed Vice-Chairman Xi Jinping..." when Xi Jinping immediately interrupted me, saying "Suiwa, why are you addressing me like that?" Seeing that reading the speech to Xi Jinping purely for formality's sake would be rather pointless, I set the paper aside.

Next, Xi Jinping inquired in detail about Liangjiahe's development. I replied "We now have electricity and running water. The road has also been completed and is open to traffic." He asked "Does the road run all the way from Liangjiahe to Wenanyi?" I replied "Yes." He inquired "How wide is it?" I answered "Three and a half metres." He pressed "Is it concrete or asphalt?" I explained "It's currently concrete with brick kerbs. We'll pave it with asphalt when conditions improve."

When officials from other areas spoke, Xi Jinping also asked very detailed questions, showing particular concern for the people's livelihoods and infrastructure development. The meeting, originally scheduled for half an hour, lasted nearly three hours. It was supposed to adjourn at 11:00 for lunch at 11:30, but it went on until 1:30, and we still hadn't eaten.

On the eve of the 2015 Spring Festival, Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan returned to Liangjiahe.

Before

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping delivers

reaching the village entrance, Xi Jinping alighted early and walked into the village alongside the villagers who had come to greet him. Passing the silt-trapping dam constructed years prior, Xi Jinping stood by the dam for a long while. On the dam's winter terrain, rows of straight saplings stood tall. Xi Jinping asked me "Suíwá, does planting saplings yield higher income than growing 玉米?" I replied "It's a bit higher, and easier to manage." Xi Jinping then scrutinised the ~~hill~~ ~~hillway~~ and the stone-reinforced embankment slopes. Satisfied with their condition, he reassured me and instructed me to strengthen management and inspections, paying particular attention to land safety during the rainy season.

Xi Jinping **then** asked me "What do we have on the mountain now?" I told him that over the past few years, fruit trees had been planted in stages, and some had begun bearing fruit. Xi Jinping was very pleased and said "Then let's go up and have a look." I said "The path isn't very easy to walk on." Xi Jinping said "It doesn't matter, we'll take it slowly." When we reached the mountain, Xi Jinping saw the orchard and asked "How profitable is growing fruit trees now? How much more than growing grain?" I replied "The returns are quite good. With a stable market, the income can be more than ten times higher." Xi Jinping then asked "Are the costs of growing fruit trees high?" I answered "Not excessively so. For instance, for one mu of fruit trees, excluding labour costs, just for spraying and fertilising, a little over a thousand yuan is sufficient. After a few years, the trees start bearing fruit, yielding several thousand yuan annually. As the trees mature into their peak fruiting period, annual income can exceed twenty thousand yuan. Grain farming pales in comparison. Our soil here lacks sufficient fertility, yielding only about six hundred jin of grain annually, which brings in a few hundred yuan at best."

Xi Jinping took a keen interest in the welfare of the village's elderly residents, asking me: "Do the elderly in Liangjiahe now receive monthly subsidies?" I replied: "Yes. Our village provides 125 yuan per month to residents aged sixty and above; the subsidy increases with age." Xi Jinping then inquired, "What about cooperative medical coverage? Is everyone protected?" I replied, "Absolutely. All residents are covered under the cooperative medical scheme, achieving a 100% enrolment rate. For illnesses requiring treatment in Yanchuan County,

Shi Chunyang: Whatever the people need, Xi Jinping
delivers

can claim back seventy to eighty per cent of their medical expenses; those seeking treatment in Yan'an city centre can claim back ~~free~~ •

That day, Xi Jinping and I stood in the orchard atop the hill, surveying the surrounding landscape of gully after gully and ridge upon ridge—a quintessential winter scene of the Loess Plateau. Returning after so many years to this land where he had lived in his youth, Xi Jinping must have been filled with memories and reflections. I could see the warmth and joy in his return to Liangjiahe. Yet he could only stay for a few hours; there was no time for sentimentality or reflection. His words and questions focused solely on the most fundamental aspects of people's lives: income, healthcare, pensions... Herein lies his pragmatism and sincerity, revealing what has always occupied his thoughts.

Whether as our village Party branch secretary back then or as General Secretary of the entire Party today, his heart has always remained among us ordinary people.

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Interviewee: Wang Yansheng, born 1951. Student at Beijing Municipal People's Congress High School. In January 1969, he was sent to Liangjiahe Village, Yanchuan County, alongside Xi Jinping, residing in the same cave dwelling. He enlisted in the military later that year. After demobilisation, he worked in factories and research institutions. He studied abroad from 1993. Prior to retirement in 2011, he held positions in foreign enterprises.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 11 May 2016

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Interview Team: Comrade Wang Yansheng, hello! We are delighted to interview you. Could you please describe the broader context of the educated youth being sent to the countryside at that time?

Wang Yansheng: On 22 December 1968, the People's Daily published an article entitled "We Have Two Hands Too, We Won't Eat Idle Rice in the Cities!" which publicly announced Chairman Mao's directive = ▶ It is quite **necessary** foreducated youth to go to the countryside and receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants." At that time, Chairman Mao's directives were relayed periodically across the nation. People would stay up late to march in the streets, beating gongs and drums.

I was a student at Renmin University High School, and my family lived near the Academy of Agricultural Sciences. I had originally planned to enlist in the army during the year-end recruitment drive, but once Chairman Mao's directive came out, I decided to heed his call and become an educated youth instead. Among our cohort of educated youths, most went to the countryside because they had heard Chairman Mao's directive, though family circumstances and personal situations may also have played a part.

Interview Team: Do you recall the circumstances of leaving Beijing for the countryside?

Wang Yansheng: Beijing's educated youth departed from Beijing Station aboard special trains, with vast crowds seeing us off. I recall boarding without my parents present—only my siblings were there. My heart brimmed with curiosity and anticipation. I cannot recall if I wept, though my family likely did. Our train carriages were divided into compartments, each housing seven or eight youths.

Back then, trains didn't run directly to Liangjiahe. There wasn't even a direct service from Beijing to Yan'an. We had to make a detour via Henan. I recall disembarking at Tongchuan in Shaanxi, where we stayed overnight in nearby lodgings. There were no beds, so we spread straw on the floor and slept there.

Wang Yansheng: Xi Jinping achieved spiritual elevation amidst adversity

The following day, we travelled by lorry to Yan'an, where we stayed overnight. On the third day, we boarded lorries bound for Wen'anyi Commune in Yancuan County. The commune hosted a meal for the educated youth in the communal courtyard, featuring steamed white buns from large bamboo steamers and stewed pork with vegetables. The educated youths sat in a circle, squatting in the courtyard to eat. We children from Beijing found the fare quite ordinary, nothing special. Later, having endured the hardships of rural life, we recalled that meal with profound appreciation. The commune had offered the finest provisions they possessed to host us. As we ate in the commune courtyard, many villagers gathered, perched on the walls surrounding the compound.

Look. The local folk were very simple-hearted. Upon hearing we were educated youths from Beijing, they all referred to us as "educated youths sent by the Central Government" or "people sent from Chairman Mao's side." After the meal, we began assembling. They read out ~~hand~~ and each village came to collect their own educated youths. It was only then that we learned we'd been assigned to Liangjiahe. The people from Liangjiahe came to help us carry our luggage, so we offered them cigarettes. When the farmers saw we were offering filter-tipped cigarettes, they accepted them with both hands. At the time, we gave them brands like Peony, Zhonghua, and Da Qianmen. Though Da Qianmen was considered quite ordinary in Beijing, it was regarded as very high-end in the countryside.

Interview Team: How did you travel from Wen'anyi to Liangjiahe?

Wang Yansheng: The Liangjiahe villagers who came to meet us loaded our large luggage and trunks onto donkeys and flatbed carts, which soon became fully laden. The remaining smaller items were carried by the villagers. Among the luggage was an inconspicuous small brown suitcase. A member named Zhang Taiping thought it was small enough to carry by hand, so he didn't put it on the cart. But as soon as he lifted it he exclaimed, "This little case looks small, but why is it so heavy?" I didn't realise ~~that~~ it was Xi Jinping's suitcase, but later learned it was his, packed full of books.

Wang Yansheng: Xi Jinping achieved spiritual elevation amidst adversity

Thus, the Liangjiahe commune members accompanied us all the way to Liangjiahe Village. By the time we arrived, dusk was already falling.

Upon arriving in Liangjiahe, as our educated youth kitchen hadn't yet been set up, we dined on shared meals at various households. The villagers' homes were lit by kerosene lamps, and we were invited onto the heated beds to eat. The family I dined with prepared huolai noodles for me. As I ate, I discovered a tiny scrap of mutton in the noodles. At the time, I thought it was rather meagre, but later learned that farmers only ate such things during the New Year celebrations.

After leaving the villager's home, they offered to walk me back, but I declined. Once outside, however, the absence of streetlights plunged me into pitch darkness. I couldn't see a thing and genuinely couldn't locate our caved dwelling. By the time I found the caved dwelling, Xi Jinping and the others had returned from their meals. We chatted and discovered that every household had prepared splendid New Year feasts: some served heluo noodles made from sorghum flour, others offered thin slices of steamed buns.

The six of us were to share one heated bed, and that evening we allocated sleeping spots. Yang Jingsheng, being particular about cleanliness, chose the first spot by the window, furthest from the stove. Lei Pingsheng's mother had lived in Yan'an and told him the spot nearest the stove was warmest, so he took the bed closest to it. It turned out to be so hot that his quilt got scorched. Xi Jinping made no deliberate choice and simply took the bed next to Lei Pingsheng.

Interview Team: Some local villagers mentioned that after you arrived in Liangjiahe, you took out bread to feed the dogs. In those times of food scarcity, they found it hard to understand. Are you aware of the specifics?

Wang Yansheng: It was actually a misunderstanding. When we went to the countryside, each of us might have carried some food and personal items. Some brought bread, but after walking for several days with it packed away, it had gone mouldy by the time we reached Liangjiahe. Mouldy bread is inedible; eating it would cause diarrhoea. The village dogs weren't usually tied up and roamed freely. When they wandered into our courtyard,

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When we first arrived in Liangjiahe, we were still unfamiliar with the villagers. There was little interaction, and we didn't understand each other's circumstances, which led to this minor misunderstanding. Later, as we gradually became acquainted with the villagers, such misunderstandings ceased to occur.

Interview Team: What difficulties did you young intellectuals encounter when first moving from Beijing to rural northern Shaanxi? How did you adapt?

Wang Yansheng: Initially, it felt utterly alien. Having grown up in big cities, we found every aspect of rural life in northern Shaanxi too arduous, too primitive, utterly inconvenient. Now, however, I believe that young people benefiting greatly from hardship and experience in their formative years.

Speaking of unfamiliar aspects of daily life, I recall seeing Xi Jinping interviewed on television discussing his "five trials." When he mentioned the "flea trial," I couldn't help but laugh. It was a knowing smile—only our generation could relate to such experiences. It brought back memories **of the hardships** we endured. Xi Jinping described it with remarkable authenticity; someone who hadn't lived through that era couldn't have captured those details.

Upon arriving in northern Shaanxi, large lumps began appearing on our bodies. Back then, we didn't realise they were flea bites. These swellings were worse than mosquito bites. We scratched them relentlessly until they broke open and bled. The quilts weren't like today's; they had no covers. Our white quilt covers were dotted with bloodstains. These welts hurt when scratched open, yet were unbearably itchy when left intact. When we asked villagers, they couldn't explain it either—none of the locals suffered from this affliction. Why should city children from Beijing contract such an ailment?

Some educated youths wrote home about it, though they couldn't explain it clearly, just saying they kept getting large, itchy welts. Their families wrote back, speculating it might be due to not being accustomed to the local water and soil. It was only later that we realised

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that flea bites were the culprit. In northern Shaanxi's countryside, livestock and poultry were infested with fleas and lice. The cave dwellings were lined with yellow earth on all sides; the floors weren't tiled like today but were compacted yellow earth surfaces where fleas thrived and multiplied. Life was generally impoverished then. Northern villagers seldom bathed throughout the year. In winter, they wore thick padded jackets and trousers, the seams of which harboured lice and fleas. When we later informed the villagers that our welts were caused by flea bites, they remained sceptical, repeatedly asking, "Why aren't we affected?" In truth, they had adapted to this environment; their bodies had developed immunity to the toxins of lice and fleas.

Interview Team: How did you manage personal hygiene in such conditions?

Wang Yansheng: Six of us shared a cave dwelling, sleeping on one heated bed. January was the height of winter, and the twelfth lunar month in northern Shaanxi is bitterly cold. Yet the bed was stoked to a blazing heat. Huddled together, we felt quite warm and cosy—it wasn't unbearable. In winter, we couldn't bathe, yet it didn't cause undue discomfort. Brushing teeth, however, was a habit we couldn't abandon—it felt unnatural not to, having started the practice in kindergarten. Toothpaste was unavailable in the village, and even in Wen'anyi it was hard to come by, though tooth powder could be purchased. That solved the brushing issue.

As the weather turned hotter, returning from work on the hillsides drenched in sweat, and with no means to bathe for so long, we grew terribly uncomfortable. Take me, for instance: growing up in Beijing, I lived in an apartment block with a bathroom where I could shower. Though conditions weren't great back then—no hot water heater—our building supplied hot water once a week, so I could bathe at least weekly. Yet in northern Shaanxi, such comforts vanished.

We all longed for a proper wash, so we'd gather at a well in a gully below the village to rinse off. Clad in swimming trunks, we'd descend into the gully and draw water from the well to splash ourselves. Beside that well stood a cross...

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The small bridge over the ditch was also a key thoroughfare in Liangjiahe Village. Later, we discovered that young women and newlyweds crossing the bridge would cover their mouths and run away upon seeing us, while the older women would point and laugh at us. When it came time for labour, the village women teased us saying, "You big babies, you're nearly grown men now—how can you go about the village bare-bottomed? The womenfolk can't bear to look at you" The women nearby would burst into laughter. We explained "We dare go bare-bottomed—we're wearing swimming trunks!" They looked utterly bewildered and asked "What are swimming trunks?" It turned out they had no idea what swimming trunks were, having never seen the kind of swimming pools found in the city. Once we realised this, we stopped washing ourselves by the well.

Interview Team: How did you manage your meals?

Wang Yansheng: Initially, the village assigned Shi Chunyang's father to gather firewood and cook for us. Soon, however, we educated youth had to prepare our own meals. The primary challenge was securing firewood. Having used briquettes in Beijing, we'd never chopped wood before. Our understanding of woodcutting was purely theoretical—we imagined simply taking an axe and a hatchet into the hills to gather fuel. Yet solving the firewood problem in Liangjiahé proved far more challenging than imagined. The loess soil there was barren, with scarcely any trees on the hills. We could only gather grass roots bit by bit to burn. Looking back now, life was truly arduous then – even cooking required constant worry over fuel.

During our first year as educated youth in the countryside, we received state-supplied grain, yet still relied on our own labour. Not only did we haul the grain back, we also processed it ourselves. We exerted great effort to transport the grain from Wen'anyi back to Liangjiahe – wheat, maize, millet, sorghum, and the like. Yet this grain arrived as semi-processed produce. Before our cave dwelling stood a millstone, which we turned with donkeys or mules to refine the crops. Corn kernels, for instance, were crushed into coarse grits for porridge;

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or ground into finer cornmeal using millstones to make dumplings. Initially, these tasks proved arduous. We struggled to drive the donkeys properly or operate the mill, and processing the grain consumed considerable time. Consequently, we prioritised consuming the easiest grains to prepare. Millet required no processing and was simply cooked as millet rice; corn needed only grinding before eating. We saved the wheat for last, as it was the most troublesome to process.

Interview Team: Could you describe your labour conditions in Liangjiahe back then?

Wang Yansheng: Upon arriving in Liangjiahe, we were assigned to the infrastructure team, primarily tasked with building dams and hauling earth. We'd never done such work in Beijing and were unskilled at it, so the villagers taught us step by step. Don't underestimate these seemingly simple manual tasks—without proper technique, they become both slow and exhausting. Initially, we couldn't even manage carrying water properly. Northern Shaanxi's carrying poles were made by binding two long, flat wooden planks together, standing taller than a man. Unlike southern bamboo poles, which flex under load to cushion the weight, these wooden poles were rigid and unyielding, pressing the full burden squarely onto our shoulders. We carried two wooden buckets on the poles to the well, hauled the water back to our dwelling, and poured it into the water jar. At first, we struggled even with the smaller buckets, mainly for two reasons: firstly, we couldn't maintain balance, constantly lurching forwards or backwards; secondly, our shoulders couldn't endure the strain. The poles dug painfully into our shoulders, and the journey from the well to the cave dwelling, though not long, required several rest stops. After several trips, our shoulders were raw and blistered. Yet when the water trough ran dry the next day, we had to fetch water again, our chafed shoulders stinging fiercely.

Come spring, the labour truly intensified. In the early days of the season, nights lingered long. By six o'clock, before dawn broke, shouts echoed through the village: 'Off to the hills to toil!' The spring farming rush demanded such early rising. We scrambled out of bed, still needing to brush our teeth. The villagers, unaccustomed to such hygiene, remarked:

Wang Yansheng: Xi Jinping achieved spiritual elevation amidst adversity

"These Beijing lads, foaming at the mouth first thing in the morning" After washing up, we'd join the farmers in tilling the land and spreading manure—even if we didn't know how, we had to follow along.

We educated youths, who couldn't even carry water properly, were assigned to haul manure up the hills during the busy season—a gruelling and filthy task. The manure baskets were shallow, filled to the brim with well-rotted farmyard manure. Carrying these baskets up the mountain was not only a long trek but also involved navigating zigzagging goat paths—narrow and steep trails that made the labour intensely demanding. Not wanting to lag behind, we pushed ourselves to walk as swiftly as possible along the path. Yet our strength soon waned, leaving us exhausted for the tasks ahead. Gradually, we observed that the farmers ascended the mountain not with swift strides, but at a leisurely pace. Having to labour in the fields day in and day out, they approached it like a long-distance race: one couldn't sprint from the start, but had to conserve energy.

During the summer harvest, we went up the mountain to gather wheat. The fields lay about five li from the village, on higher ground. After cutting, the wheat was stacked in bundles. Carrying them back meant one bundle per end of the pole. This was more exhausting for two reasons: firstly, the distance was considerable and the path difficult; and secondly, because no matter how far we went, we couldn't rest in between. If we set the pole down, the sheaves would hit the ground and the ears of wheat would scatter. At that time, the yield per mu was less than 100 jin, so if we lost a few jin of wheat ears on the way back, the loss was enormous. Therefore, when carrying wheat, we could only switch shoulders; we couldn't take the pole off to rest. Five miles of mountain road, laden with wheat, often took an hour to traverse—and that was considered swift.

At the time, Xi Jinping was the youngest among our village's educated youth. These farm tasks proved exceptionally challenging for him. When we learnt to plough, for instance, it looked straightforward enough – others managed it in a single straight line – but our attempts were crooked and uneven. Initially, Xi Jinping was as unskilled as the rest of us, yet he never gave up. After enduring considerable hardship, he grew proficient in his work.

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After I left Liangjiahe, I was somewhat surprised to hear he'd become the village Party secretary. I hadn't expected him to put down roots in the countryside.

Interview Team: Xi Jinping lived in the same cave dwelling as you. What was his leisure time like?

Were there any amusing incidents?

Wang Yansheng: After returning from labour, we'd listen to the radio in the cave dwelling. Sometimes peers from the village would come to chat with us. We educated youth got on very well with the villagers of Liangjiahe. Not only did we never have any conflicts, arguments, or fights, but our relationships were exceptionally close.

We'd read books in the cave dwellings, using kerosene lamps made from ink bottles for light. Sometimes we'd lie about chatting, singing songs from 200 Foreign Folk Songs. Back then, there were even handwritten copies of that book, and we'd learn the tunes from it.

Xi Jinping brought many books with him. The one that left the deepest impression on me was Quiet Flows the Don, a four-volume hardcover edition. I borrowed it for a while, and it became the first world classic I ever read thoroughly from cover to cover. In 2013, I saw online news reports of Xi Jinping's visit to Russia, where he mentioned numerous literary masterpieces, including Sholokhov's Quiet Flows the Don

One amusing incident occurred when our landlord Zhang Taiping married. We educated youth went to play pranks at the wedding chamber. Around that year's Spring Festival, three households in Liangjiahe had weddings. One was Zhang Taiping marrying Liu Jinlian. The villagers had us educated youth sit on the heated bed, addressing us as "those from the Central Government," treating us as honoured guests and having the bride light our cigarettes. Truth be told, we didn't cause much of a ruckus, as we knew little of rural wedding customs and were merely joining in the merriment. Life in the countryside

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was rather uneventful. So when something novel like the landlord's son taking a wife happened, us young lads were bound to go and have a look.

A few days later, a family across the gully had a wedding. They were classified as rich peasants because they owned a flock of sheep, hence being labelled 'sheep-rich peasants'. Yet their wedding was quite lively. The villagers of Liangjiahe were all very down-to-earth folk, paying little heed to the 'class distinctions' imposed from above.

The third wedding was for Zhang Weipang's family. He had married into Liangjiahe as a son-in-law. Before long, we became acquainted with Zhang Weipang. Once, I teased him, "arrived in Liangjiahe before you did." Zhang Weipang chuckled "Quite so, quite!" Zhang Weipang's father, the village's former Party secretary and a veteran revolutionary, passed away within two years of arranging Zhang Weipang's wedding. By then I had already left Liangjiahe, but I later heard that Xi Jinping specifically attended the funeral service at Zhang Weipang's home.

There was another minor incident from those days, though my recollection is hazy—perhaps it could be verified later. We had a group photograph taken during our time as educated youths, featuring everyone except Xi Jinping. The exact circumstances of that photo shoot have faded from memory. Later, we all found it peculiar that he was absent. Some recalled the situation that photograph was actually taken by Xi Jinping himself! ▶

Interview Team: Did you find life during the Cultural Revolution arduous? How did this period as educated youth shape you?

Wang Yansheng: I believe that for us educated youths, the hardship of the late 1960s and early 1970s rural placement primarily lay in physical toil and daily deprivation. We laboured like peasants on the barren loess plateau, enduring shortages of food and necessities, even worrying about firewood. Yet for

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Xi Jinping, however, this was not the primary challenge. The mental anguish and emotional suppression he endured were far greater than the physical hardships and material deprivation.

Among our cohort of Beijing-based educated youths sent to the countryside, most were students from the 81st School, predominantly children of cadres and high-ranking intellectuals. Specifically within our group, Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, held the highest rank – he was Vice Premier of the State Council before being persecuted. The parents of the others did not hold particularly high positions. My father was a department-level cadre in Beijing. **The Cultural Revolution**, the impact on my family and the psychological pressure I endured were not as severe as those experienced by Xi Jinping's household.

It is not difficult to imagine the stark contrast between Xi Jinping's family background and the harsh realities of rural life during the Down to the Countryside Movement.

In 1970, during the Second Plenary Session of the Ninth Central Committee, several of us educated youth listened to the radio in a cave dwelling. When the broadcast announced the list of full and alternate members of the Central Committee, Xi Jinping listened with particular attentiveness. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was notably absent from the list. Though Xi Jinping said nothing at the time, I could sense his profound disappointment. He was a resilient soul, never one to complain to those around him or voice his own anguish, yet we understood his state of mind: his beloved father had endured nine years of persecution, his fate still uncertain; his mother lived under constant scrutiny and criticism; while he and his siblings bore the stigma of being "**children of counter-revolutionary gang members**"; a once-intact family had been torn apart. The immense pressure this placed upon a seventeen-year-old boy was profoundly palpable.

Moreover, within a year or two, the educated youths who had come to the commune with him gradually departed. We all returned to our hometowns to work on the communes first, then enlisted from there, as our parents had joined the revolution from their hometowns, making it easier for their children to join the army. And enlisting was an excellent path—

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in those days, military service was the most honourable path, conferring the highest social standing.

Yet Xi Zhongxun's case remained unresolved for an extended period, inflicting immense hardship upon his family. For the young Xi Jinping, finding a way out of Liangjiahe proved exceedingly arduous. The immense psychological strain arising from this predicament constituted a profound spiritual ordeal, a suffering far exceeding physical hardship or material deprivation—one beyond our comprehension.

Amidst such harsh conditions, Xi Jinping refused to succumb to dependency. He immersed himself in the yellow earth and among the farmers, determined to put down roots in the countryside and transform Liangjiahe. He remained there for seven years, during which he achieved tangible results through sheer hard work and diligence.

Later, in interviews, Xi Jinping spoke of his initial confusion upon arriving in the countryside and his subsequent transformation – perspectives I wholeheartedly endorse. His words rang true. Everything undergoes a developmental process; every individual experiences a journey of tempering and growth. There is no such thing as "innate greatness". This aligns precisely with what Xi Jinping termed **the "ideological hurdle"** among the "five hurdles" he had to overcome.

Interview Team: Could you elaborate on your understanding of Xi Jinping's "ideological hurdle"?

Wang Yansheng: Our generation, particularly those who were sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, experienced firsthand the hardships of rural life and witnessed China's most impoverished and primitive conditions.

For Xi Jinping, his experiences extended far beyond this. During the Cultural Revolution, his father was persecuted, and he himself was labelled, discriminated against, and confined to the impoverished mountain valleys of northern Shaanxi, enduring countless injustices. Yet within this adversity, Xi underwent a profound transformation, achieving a spiritual elevation. From a bewildered teenager of fifteen or sixteen, he matured into a young man who had tasted life's bitter and sweet experiences, harbouring an aspiration to serve the people. This fundamentally shaped the distinct path his life would take.

Wang Yansheng: Xi Jinping achieved spiritual elevation amidst adversity

When Xi Jinping later returned to Beijing for his studies and secured a promising career, he rejected the seemingly smoother, more comfortable path. Instead, he immersed himself in grassroots work, plunging to the very frontlines of social practice. Step by step, each stride was deliberate and purposeful. This is a choice only someone of great ambition, vision, capability, and courage could make.

By conventional wisdom, wouldn't it be far simpler to accept a well-arranged position at home, choose a leisurely and well-paid public office, study abroad, or even emigrate to enjoy generous welfare benefits? Why subject oneself to the hardships of grassroots work? Xi Jinping's choice to walk this path is directly linked to his aspiration to "deliver tangible benefits to the people."

Our nation thrives precisely because it possesses individuals like Xi Jinping—not necessarily senior officials, but workers, farmers, teachers, doctors. Whether extraordinary or ordinary, they share a common trait: a profound love for this country and a willingness to dedicate their entire lives to its advancement. This is why China has achieved such rapid development and remarkable progress, and why it possesses such a promising future.

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Interviewee: Villager from Zhaojiahe

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 28 February 2016

Location: Wu Gangwen's residence, Zhaojiahe Village, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

In March 1973, the Yanchuan County Party Committee selected Xi Jinping to join the Rural Socialist Education Work Team

and stationed him at the Zhaojiakou Brigade of Fengjiaping Commune, where he remained until November of that year. During his eight-month tenure in Zhaojiakou, Xi Jinping not only handled administrative duties such as document dissemination, brigade leadership restructuring, and production team cadre appointments, but also worked alongside villagers constructing terraced fields, building earthen dams, and planting trees. His efforts earned him the full praise of Zhaojiakou villagers and high recognition from Fengjiaping Commune. Zhao Tingbi, the commune secretary at the time, wished to retain him as Party secretary for the Zhaojiakou Brigade. Bai Guangxing, Party Committee Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune, retorted: "You wish! How could we let our best talent go to you!" After the conclusion of when Xi returned to Liangjiahe in January 1974, the Wen'anyi Commune Party Committee decided to appoint Xi, not yet 21 years old, as Party Secretary of the Liangjiahe Brigade.

The anecdotes recounted by seven villagers from Zhaojiahe during this interview represent but fragments of Xi Jinping's eight-month rural experience during the Socialist Education Movement. Yet they reveal how an ambitious young man, enduring hardship on the barren and backward Loess Plateau, laid the foundations for his future step by step during this pivotal first chapter of his life.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.



"Xinping taught me to write

Gao Xiaomei

Interview Team: Hello! Why did Xi Jinping call you the "Iron Maiden" back then?

Gao Xiaomei: Back then, there were fourteen or fifteen of us girls working there. Though I was the youngest and smallest, I stood out most in labour. I handled cooking and meal distribution, being the quickest on my feet. I'd prepare and deliver everyone's meals swiftly. When working, I matched the men's strength. Come spring, when manuring the fields, others carried seven loads, and I could manage seven loads too. Xi Jinping noticed me and started calling me "Iron Maiden." It stuck, and whenever he saw me, he would say, "Iron Maiden, you're here?" When he said that, the girls around me would all laugh, which made me feel rather embarrassed.

Interview Team: Did he labour alongside you?

Gao Xiaomei: Yes, he worked alongside us. When Xi Jinping came to our village of Zhaojiakou, he organised and mobilised the entire village to build a dam on the mountain. It was the dead of winter then, the earth frozen solid. Pickaxes couldn't break it, shovels couldn't dig it. We had to use explosives to blast chunks of rock loose, then haul them away with wheelbarrows and level the ground. It was backbreaking work. Many villagers wanted to stay home for the winter break (xml-ph-0000@deepl.internal) and rest, but he insisted we keep working.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

wheelbarrows to level the ground. It was gruelling work, and many villagers **preferred to 'hibernate at home'** (referring to the winter rest period in northern areas) rather than endure the hardship on the hills. ~~Xi jingping~~ Pull together! When the pot is full, the bowls are full; when the pot is empty, the bowls are empty (a Shaanxi proverb implying that collective prosperity brings shared prosperity). In truth, Xi Jinping acted solely for the villagers' benefit: building dams to expand farmland and increase grain production would provide them with more food. Yet such sentiments could not be openly voiced at the time (referring to the prohibition on promoting small collective or personal interests).

He noticed that every noon, everyone would trudge down from the hills to cook and eat, then trudge back to work. It was exhausting and a waste of time – a whole hour or two lost to this hectic round trip. With so many people, they could easily rest properly at midday and get much more done in the time saved.

To save time, Xi proposed a solution: instead of returning home each noon, we would remain on the mountain. A few designated individuals would cook and deliver meals to us. After eating, we could rest briefly before resuming work.

This way, we could rest in the mountains at midday, build a fire, gather round it, and chat. Xi Jinping would sit with us, dressed in a thick cotton padded jacket, covered in yellow earth, indistinguishable from the rest of us. Yet when he spoke, his uniqueness became apparent. He told us stories and discussed major domestic and international events, which delighted us immensely. Back then, the village had newspapers, though most villagers were illiterate and seldom read them. Xi Jinping, however, always read them. He was well-informed about major and minor events both at home and abroad. Combined with his habit of reading extensively and his broad knowledge, the topics he brought up in conversation held particular fascination for us. The weather was bitterly cold then, with temperatures plunging below minus ten degrees Celsius at their lowest. By the time the food arrived, it had grown cold.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

would gather round the fire to warm our meals before eating. Sometimes we'd roast sweet potatoes over the embers too. Though Xi Jinping usually ate slowly and methodically, he'd hurry us along then, urging: "Come on, everyone, eat quicker! The food'll go cold otherwise."

After eating, we rested briefly before resuming work. As the day drew to a close, everyone was exhausted, yet Xi Jinping remained as energetic as ever, labouring with undiminished vigour. He rallied the team, declaring "Comrades! Give it your all! Push through this final stretch! We'll be done shortly."

Back then, we'd head up the mountain for labour at six or seven in the morning and wouldn't return until evening. Xi Jinping, as a commune education cadre, led us in the work. Every day he'd oversee this and that, yet he did just as much labour as us, even putting in more effort than most. The older villagers would privately praise him "That lad Xi Jinping – don't let his city background fool you. He can really endure hardship Proper impressive"

Interview Team: Besides working alongside you, did he also lead study sessions?

Gao Xiaomei: Yes, indeed. At that time, Xi Jinping also established a night school in the village. This night school was considered the finest in the entire county at the time and later became a county-level pilot programme, known as Zhaojiahe Village Youth Night. This youth night school differed from the village Party branch's production meetings. While production meetings assembled by ringing a bell, ours assembled by blowing a whistle. There were two or three dozen of us young people who attended Xi Jinping's night school every evening. We gathered in Suíwá's cave dwelling, which back then had no heated bed platform. In the centre stood a long stone slab table, much like a modern conference table, and we'd all crowd around it. Each night, kerosene lamps would be lit, and Xi Jinping would give us lessons.

I was illiterate, having never attended school, and many of us couldn't read or write. Xi Jinping taught us to recognise characters and write our own names. He would ascertain each person's name, write it down for us, then teach us stroke by stroke how to write it ourselves. I can write my name, Gao Xiaomei, 高小梅

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

taught me back then.

After a full day's labour, we'd come to the night school after dark, yet we never felt weary—our hearts were filled with joy. Young people are full of vigour, and Xi Jinping never seemed tired either. Every day he taught us lessons, helped us learn to read and write, and even taught us songs and dances. Some of the things Xi Jinping often said back then I still remember. He would say "A train runs fast because the locomotive leads the way." Meaning we must fully leverage the role of the Party branch. He also often said "To forge iron, one must be strong oneself." Meaning that to set others straight, one must first set oneself straight; what one demands of others, one must first achieve oneself.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.



"Xi Jinping appointed me as tea

Wu Gangwen

Interview Team: Uncle Wu, your childhood nickname was also Suiwa, wasn't it? Wu Gangwen: Yes!

Interview Team: Were you the team leader in Zhaojiakou at that time?

Wu Gangwen: At Zhaojiakou, I first served as captain of the infrastructure team, overseeing terraced field construction and dam building. After three years, the village appointed me production team captain. Throughout my tenure, I never neglected infrastructure duties. Beyond production tasks, I led members in constructing dams and reclaiming mountain land. This enabled our team to harvest more grain and consistently outperform others. Yet this very commitment landed me in trouble.

Interview Team: What sort of trouble?

Wu Gangwen: One day, the county Party secretary cycled into our village for an inspection. As he rode over a mountain and happened to see our production team reclaiming land. He forbade it, stating that our team should

not

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

undertake infrastructure tasks, and that our land reclamation violated regulations as it hadn't been approved by the county authorities. I retorted, "We're reclaiming land to grow more grain—what's wrong with that? Why should we stop?" I ended up having a heated argument with the county Party secretary. After that, I resigned as team leader in a huff. Being team leader meant the most hardship and drudgery anyway—I'd had enough of it.

After that, I tended sheep for the village for three years. I was rather good at it too—I trained the team's sheep to be very well-behaved, grazing only on the grass beneath the crops, not the crops themselves. Back then, I worked in the fields in the mornings, tended sheep in the afternoons, and then helped build dams after sheep-herding. Each day was exhausting, but not being team leader meant fewer worries, and I was quite content.

Interview Team: Why did you later return to being the team leader?

Wu Gangwen: When Xi Jinping came to Zhaojiahe, I was 27. Having heard about my past from villagers, he approached me and said, "Suiwa, you must take up the role of team leader again."

I replied "I won't do it. I've had enough."

He replied "No, you must take the post. You can boost production as team leader." Later, villagers advised me "If Xi Jinping wants you to lead, you should accept. He sees you

an upright, honest, and capable man, and that's why he wants you to lead."

But I'm a stubborn sort. I'd only stepped down after arguing with the county Party secretary, so no one was persuading me back now.

Though I was stubborn, Xi Jinping possessed boundless patience. He sought me out time and again, urging me to consider the collective good and use my abilities to serve the entire production brigade. He even asked "Do you heed the Party's words? If not, it shows your consciousness is lacking. I'll arrange a study session for you." After more than ten such talks, he finally persuaded me. I said:

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

"Alright, I'll take the post." He replied "That's the spirit"

At that time, the village had three production teams, and Xi Jinping appointed me as the leader of the second team. In truth, being a production team leader was mentally taxing—far more complex than being the village Party branch secretary. Essentially, the leader had to arrange everything concerning the team members' production, daily lives, and work-point evaluations. If the arrangements were unreasonable—if one person received too much while another got too little—the team members would voice their discontent, and that simply wouldn't do.

Having been out of the role for years, I encountered difficulties. That's when Xi Jinping came to our second brigade to help resolve issues. He assisted me in managing the collective and convening brigade meetings. He possessed excellent eloquence, spoke well and practically, and handled matters fairly. So whenever he arrived, whatever difficulties arose could be resolved.

My team comprised some twenty households, a motley crew with many voices and opinions. Disputes were most likely to arise during the allocation of work points, for instance. Some worked harder than others, and it was impossible to award everyone the same points. If everyone received the same points, those who worked harder would feel aggrieved; if points were distributed unevenly, those who received fewer would complain. I'm a straightforward sort myself, not much good at mediating disputes. When those who got fewer points shouted at me, I shouted back. After all the shouting, everyone would say: "Stop shouting! What good does shouting do? Call Pingjing! Let Pingjing settle it!" So we'd fetch Ping to step in. Whenever he arrived, he'd mediate perfectly. His words were always reasonable, leaving everyone convinced and satisfied. After he settled things, no one had anything more to say.

Ping was an educated youth from outside our village, younger than me by years—still a lad, really. Yet I respected him implicitly. Whatever he said, I listened. I'm a stubborn sort myself—I wouldn't listen to the county party secretary, dared to argue with him—but I heeded Ping. Because Ping was fair-minded, spoke with reason, never looked out for himself, always considered the collective good.

Now I'm over seventy, old and hard of hearing, my eyesight failing, yet I still listen to

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a
fine lad.

He is the President of the country, after all. If he asked me to be the team leader now, I'd still do it.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

"Xi Jinping placed the grain coupons and money at the bottom of the bowl"

Nie Ruilan



Interview Team: Hello, we understand that Xi Jinping's first meal in Zhaojiahe was at your home. Do you recall the circumstances?

Nie Ruilan: I remember. When Xi Jinping came to Zhaojiahe, he ate his first meal at my house. Before he arrived, I thought to myself: he's a lad from Beijing, coming to our poor mountain hollow of Zhaojiahe. This first meal is a welcome feast—we simply must give the lad a proper meal.

At that time, each household only received a few pounds of white flour per year. I had saved the white flour I received that year, never bringing myself to eat it. On the day Xi Jinping arrived, I took out that white flour, rolled it into noodles, and cooked him a hot noodle soup. While boiling the noodles, I cracked an egg into the pot – an egg laid by our own chickens. Once the hot noodle soup was ready, I ladled it into a white porcelain bowl and carried it over to Xi Jinping.

While Xi Jinping ate, I sent my own children outside the cave dwelling to play. Otherwise, if the children stood watching, the adults would feel sorry for them and give them bits here and there, and no one would eat properly. That's why I didn't let the children come near. Xi Jinping ate that meal with great relish,

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

eating slowly, chewing each mouthful thoroughly.

As he ate he remarked "Sister-in-law, these noodles are truly delicious" I replied "I'm glad you like them. Eat your fill, and I'll serve you more when you've finished."

After he finished that bowl, I served him another. When he was done, I asked "Are you full?"

He replied "I'm full"

Interview Team: Did he discuss anything else with you afterwards?

Nie Ruilan: Xi Jinping pulled out ration coupons and money from his pocket and tried to give them to me. I refused, insisting I wouldn't take anything. He couldn't persuade me, so he left. After he departed, I went to clear the table. When I picked up the bowl, I discovered a pound and two ounces worth of ration coupons and three mao coins tucked underneath. Back then, those coupons and coins were worth several times more than those two bowls of hot noodles.

Some time later, when it was my turn to host him for a communal meal (a practice where brigade cadres assigned households to cook for visiting guests, with the brigade later distributing labour points as compensation), I chatted with him while preparing the meal.

I said, "Jingping, we earn work points for making guest meals. You don't need to give us grain coupons or money!" Jingping replied, "I know that. But I have them, so please take them, sister-in-law."

This time I made him a bean stew, using the finest beans I could find. He ate it with such relish.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.



"It nearly drove Jinping to death"

Zhao Fuyou

Interview Team: Hello, you were involved in the dam construction back then, weren't you? Do you recall any details from that period?

Zhao Fuyou: In 1973, we spent the entire winter building the dam. Come spring, the weather was still bitterly cold, and the loess had frozen solid. We had to use explosives to break up the frozen ground. Unexpectedly, disaster struck one day. During blasting, a massive chunk of frozen earth tumbled down the slope, crushing a fellow commune member's leg. He was immediately unable to walk. Everyone exclaimed, "Oh dear, it must be broken!"

Xinping immediately organised the group to carry the injured member back to the village. They laid him on the heated bed in a cave dwelling to rest. Xinping then urgently arranged for someone to contact the county authorities, requesting they send personnel to collect the injured member. The messenger had to travel to the town first, then onto the county seat, which would take considerable time. During this period, Xinping remained waiting outside the injured member's home. We urged him, "Xinping, go and wait!" He waved them off, saying, "None."

The injured member was suffering inside the cave dwelling, and the messenger sent to make contact was taking an agonisingly long time to return. Xi Jinping was both anxious and deeply distressed.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

He paced back and forth outside the injured member's cave dwelling for a very long time, making hundreds of trips. That time, Xi Jinping was truly beside himself with worry.

Interview Team: What happened next?

Zhao Fuyou: Thankfully, that fellow got prompt treatment. His leg healed completely without any lasting issues. Later, folks in our village remarked "That lad Xi Jinping has a good heart! At the time, Xi Jinping was our village's assigned cadre for the Socialist Education Movement, a village leader. Yet when a fellow villager was injured, none of us locals were as concerned as he was. He truly cared about our safety and wellbeing – we mustn't forget that.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.



"Jinping helped me find my pig"

Zhao Xiuquan

Interview Team: Do you recall any incidents involving Xi Jinping during his time in your village?

Zhao Xiuquan: Xi Jinping taught classes for me and dined at my home. But what I recall most clearly is him helping me find my pig.

One day, before feeding the pigs, I cleared out the pen and let them out. After finishing the cleaning, the pigs were behaving quite well in the yard, so I let my guard down. I thought, once I put the feed in the pen, they'd go back on their own. But the little blighter took the chance to bolt!

I carried the feeding trough into the yard and—where on earth had the pig gone? Frantic, I slammed the trough down and stamped my feet as I dashed out searching, cursing all the while – You good-for-nothing pig! If you get lost, what a bloody loss that'll be!" I searched everywhere but couldn't find it. Such a big village, so many hills—if the pig had followed the path somewhere else, I'd never find it. The damage was done.

Just as I was trudging home dejectedly, I reached the doorstep and saw Xi Jinping driving that pig back from the opposite direction.

back with the pig. The pig looked just as dejected—it hadn't managed to escape, and I bet it felt

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

As soon as Jinping saw me he snapped "Why didn't you keep the pig properly?"

I replied "Oh dear, I wasn't paying attention and let it escape. Jinping, how did you find it?" Jinping said "I recognised it as the one you feed, so I drove it back."

Why didn't you keep a proper eye on it? Pigs must be kept securely; you can't let them run about freely. We must do our jobs properly and dare not be careless!"

I nodded repeatedly "Yes! Yes!"

Though Jinping gave me a telling-off, I was actually quite pleased. Firstly, he was right and I should accept it. Secondly, the pig was back, so our family wouldn't suffer any loss.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.



'Wod off during Jinping's meetings'•

Zhao Xungong

Interview Team: Hello, what stands out most in your memory about Xi Jinping's time conducting socialist education work in Zhaojiahe?

Zhao Xungong: When Xi Jinping came to Zhaojiahe, I was the village accountant. I had a very favourable impression of him and would always chat with him whenever I had the chance. Sometimes, he would even have meals at my home.

After Xi came, he often organised meetings for us, set up night classes to teach us young people to read and write, and arranged singing and dancing sessions. We were all very interested. Whenever we heard Xi was holding a meeting, we'd hurry over. Before that, when the village cadres organised meetings for the members, we'd dawdle on our way there. Even when we arrived, we wouldn't listen properly – some would chat, some would sew shoe soles, and some would doze off. But when Xi Jinping addressed us, we listened with rapt attention. Why? Because he spoke with such engaging clarity—on the Party line, on matters concerning our rural lives, always practical and directly relevant to us as commune members. Beyond that, he elucidated major domestic and international events with remarkable lucidity and charm. We admired him greatly, telling him: 'Your mind is truly extraordinary!'•

During his time in Zhaojiahe, Xi Jinping lived, ate, and worked alongside us commune members. He ate the same food as us

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

. Back then, even having a meal with white flour buns was difficult. He took turns eating at our members' homes, but never had anything particularly good. He was incredibly hardworking, doing the same tasks as us and putting in even more effort.

When he was to return to Liangjiahe, several of us saw him off. We didn't want him to leave, but as an educated youth assigned to Liangjiahe, he had to go back. At the time, we all felt Xi Jinping was a fine lad, and none of us wanted to see him go. During his time in our Zhaojiakou, he brought significant changes to our village: building dams, constructing terraced fields, organising meetings, running night classes, teaching us many things, and helping many people learn to write their own names... To this day, the villagers still remember Xi Jinping fondly, and we often bring him up in conversation.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.



"Xi Jinping Helps an Old Man"

Zhao Shengli

Interview Team: Comrade Zhao Shengli, hello! During Xi Jinping's assignment as a cadre for the Socialist Education Movement in Zhaojiahe, you worked and lived alongside him for several months. Could you tell us what led to his assignment to Zhaojiahe?

Zhao Shengli: In 1973, the county Youth League Committee in Yanchuan underwent a leadership reshuffle. Tao Haishu, an educated youth from Beijing, was elected as county Youth League Secretary. At that time, the county Youth League Committee was responsible for assigning personnel to conduct political education in the villages. At that time, Xi Jinping was stationed in Liangjiahe. He was exceptionally diligent in his labour, got on very well with the local villagers in his daily life, and was well-regarded by the masses. Politically, he was also actively seeking to advance. An outstanding educated youth like him was well-suited to conducting political propaganda in the countryside. Consequently, Tao Haisu assigned him to our Zhaojiahe village **to "take up a post"** (meaning to be stationed in the production brigade to oversee work) and take charge of the line education campaign.

My first encounter with Xi Jinping occurred in the first half of 1973. He arrived in our village of Zhaojiahe around March or April, a time I recall when the willow trees were just beginning to bud. Having travelled by bus from the county seat to Fengjiaping Commune, he then walked the rest of the way to our village. Upon his arrival, he first presented

We briefly introduced ourselves, and he said "Good day, comrades. I am Xi Jinping, the sent-down youth from Liangjiahe in our Wen'anyi Commune."

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

from Liangjiahe. My name is Xi Jinping." We all welcomed his arrival And so, Jinping became our resident cadre, staying on to begin his work.

Interview Team: After getting to know him better, what characteristics did you notice about him?

Zhao Shengli: Initially, we weren't very familiar with him, so we didn't notice anything particularly distinctive about him. But after spending a bit more time together, we discovered that Jinping had very distinct characteristics.

Before Xi came, when our village held meetings or conducted political education sessions, nobody was particularly interested. People were listless and reluctant to attend. All that talk of politics, slogans, party lines, struggles, and criticisms... those abstract debates about matters far removed from us mountain folk tilling the soil – what did they have to do with us? The villagers had no interest in "political education." When they went to "be educated," they'd chat idly among themselves and pay no attention. With two or three hundred people, once things got rowdy, the meeting would grind to a halt. The original education cadres and village officials were constantly shutting down the chaos: "Everyone, listen properly! Stop nodding off! No whispering among yourselves!" But it was all to no avail; people simply couldn't muster any interest.

But ever since Xi Jinping arrived, whenever he convened a re-education meeting, everyone attended punctually. Order was impeccable—people not only listened attentively but engaged fully with Xi Jinping. At the time, our brigade had a witty fellow named Ren Houcheng who remarked: "Xi Jinping's speeches ~~can't help but~~ (meaning "listening until you're dumbfounded or transfixed," describing a state of deep, self-forgetful absorption) - "

Interview Team: Why is that?

Zhao Shengli: Precisely because Xi Jinping's speeches are exceptionally down-to-earth and genuinely engaging. As a person,

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

by nature, is very approachable and has a strong rapport with people. He is also highly knowledgeable with an excellent memory, and he shares a lot of common ground with us members. Moreover, he has a broad grasp of knowledge across various fields—politics, economics, science, culture—he understands them all. When conducting political education sessions, he never resorts to dry lectures or sloganeering. Instead, he makes learning enjoyable, conversing with us as if sharing everyday stories. Moreover, the topics he discusses are precisely those that interest ordinary folk like us.

Xi Jinping once recounted to us how, at the age of four or five, he had met Premier Zhou Enlai. Premier Zhou, kind and approachable, had taken his hand and stroked his head. Hearing this, we were all filled with envy. Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou were revered giants in our eyes; to have met them was an extraordinary experience.

Most members of our village commune had never travelled far. Transport was inconvenient back then; villagers seldom even visited the town or county, let alone understood the wider world. Xi Jinping often shared China's geography, history, and culture with us, concisely introducing the customs and traditions of every region from south to north, east to west, inside and outside the Great Wall, and across the vast expanse of rivers and mountains.

Moreover, his knowledge of the geography and history of countries worldwide was remarkably extensive. He could recount the continents and nations of our planet, their capitals, social systems, ethnic groups, climates, and geographical features. He could also speak to us about famous historical figures and events.

When it came to specific historical events, Xi Jinping's accounts were particularly engaging. On one occasion, he recounted the internationally significant "Watergate scandal" to our commune members. We mountain-dwelling farmers knew nothing about "American imperialism," let alone what **"Watergate"** meant—we were utterly baffled by the term. Xi Jinping patiently and meticulously explained it to us, even

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

explaining the characteristics of America's capitalist social system and the "**donkey-elephant rivalry**" between the two major parties. Unable to finish in one evening, he declared, "To be continued," and resumed the tale the following night. On another occasion, he recounted a film he'd seen called The Three Laughs. The plot was rather intricate, yet he recalled it vividly after viewing it, recounting the entire tale from start to finish with such liveliness and charm. We listened with rapt attention, utterly enthralled. Some members, holding cigarettes between their fingers, forgot to draw on them until the heat suddenly made them flinch and they hastily discarded them.

Xi Jinping wove these personal experiences, political knowledge, domestic and international affairs, cultural arts, and intriguing tales from Beijing into his educational work, delivering them to us with such skill that his efforts progressed remarkably smoothly. Back then, we members particularly relished listening to Xi Jinping's "lectures," chatting with him, exchanging ideas, learning politicsculture, and the arts, reading books, and perusing newspapers. Through this, our horizons broadened, and we gained a wealth of knowledge.

Ever since Xi Jinping arrived in our village, it flourished remarkably: by day we laboured together, "battling heaven and earth"; by night we held meetings filled with lively discussion and constant laughter. After the meetings, Zhao Zhigong and I would often chat with Xi Jinping late into the night, discussing labour matters, arranging the next day's work, and formulating upcoming production plans.

Interview Team: As the political education cadre in Zhaojiahe at that time, was Xi Jinping primarily responsible for infrastructure and production in addition to political education work?

Zhao Shengli: Yes. As a cadre stationed in the village for **intensive grassroots work**, Xi Jinping's responsibilities at the time encompassed two main areas: on the one hand, propagating Party policies and conducting political education among commune members; on the other, organising work around government-assigned tasks and leading commune members in production and construction efforts.

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

Though Xi Jinping had not yet joined the Party at that time, he had already assumed many of the duties of the village Party branch secretary. Not only did he preside over the work of the Youth League Committee among the young members, but he also participated in, arranged, and led the work of the Party branch, performing all these tasks exceptionally well. This was no mean feat.

Upon his arrival, Xi Jinping immediately faced a critical infrastructure decision. A long-standing dispute in our village of Zhaojiahe centred on the management of Shenche Gully. Some members advocated damming the mountain ravine to reclaim land, while others opposed the idea, deeming it ill-advised. Opinions remained deeply divided on whether to proceed with the project.

Xi Jinping felt the matter could not be delayed further. He promptly convened a village meeting to deliberate on the issue. During the discussion, opinions flowed freely. Some argued "Building a dam is impractical. Come summer, if mountain floods descend, they'll drown all our crops. How will we compensate for the losses?" Others countered "If floods don't come, the grain we harvest will be tangible. If we don't build this dam, it's as if Shenche Gully lies fallow year after year, costing us hundreds of acres of grain annually." The old secretary and I supported the project, while many others opposed it. Each side argued their case, and the debate reached an impasse. Seeing that Xi Jinping had been listening without speaking, someone asked him "Xi Jinping, what's your view? Do you think we should build this dam?" Xi Jinping replied, "We should build it."

That settled it. Not a single villager argued further. The very next day, Jinping led us straight into action. Working day and night, within three months we had levelled Shenche Gully and constructed the dam. This added nearly a hundred mu of arable land to the Zhaoji River basin. Moreover, the dammed land proved highly irrigable and productive. To this day, this dammed area remains extensively planted with maize, yielding consistently high annual harvests.

Interview Team: Please tell us the story of the "Knowledge Youth Forest".

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

Zhao Shengli: The Youth Forest is located in Mahuagou, and it actually has a direct connection to this embankment land in Shenchengou. Because this embankment was so well constructed, in the spring of 1974, Tao Haisu, the county Youth League Committee Secretary, organised Youth League secretaries from all communes and production teams across the county to visit our village of Zhaojiakou for study and observation. At that time, the Youth League secretaries all walked here, each carrying a bundle of saplings uniformly purchased by the county Youth League Committee. In the morning, they visited the terraced fields in Shenche Gully, attended meetings, and studied. After lunch, everyone went to Mahuagou to plant trees. Once the trees were planted and watered, everyone returned to their respective homes.

Over forty years have passed since then. Those saplings, barely a metre tall back then, have now grown into towering trees. Our villagers named this grove the Educated Youth Forest. It stands beside the main road leading into our village. Whenever I pass by, I often pause for a moment. When the wind stirs, the leaves rustle and whisper, creating a vast, majestic canopy. The scenery there is beautiful, especially in the golden autumn season, resembling an oil painting. Passers-by, whether on foot or in vehicles, invariably pause to admire it.

During his more than half a year in Zhaojiahe, Xi Jinping organised his work with remarkable precision and foresight. Whether it was political education, running literacy classes, agricultural infrastructure development, grain production, or training grassroots cadres, he tackled each task systematically and methodically. Before returning to Liangjiahe, he had completed every assignment thoroughly and effectively. Thus, though his seven or eight months in Zhaojiahe seemed fleeting, the transformations he brought to our village were profound.

Interview Team: During those seven or eight months, you worked alongside him continuously. Are there any other incidents that left a deep impression on you? Please recall them.

Zhao Shengli: Two minor incidents stand out. The first concerns Xi Jinping personally constructing a latrine. Near the caved dwelling where he resided stood a communal toilet used by all residents of that row of dwellings,

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

and passers-by would use it too. But it was very small and extremely rudimentary. Life in northern Shaanxi's countryside back then was hard, and people paid little attention to toilet facilities. They'd dig a pit, roughly enclose it with wood, straw, or mud bricks, and cover it with a thatched roof – that was their toilet. Hence **it was commonly called a "ditch toilet".** Men would stand inside to relieve themselves, and sometimes women passing by could see them.

Shortly after Xi Jinping arrived, he set about constructing separate public toilets for men and women. He demolished the old latrine and rebuilt it using bricks and stones, enlarging the space and raising the walls. He created one cubicle for men and one for women, each separate, much more spacious, and offering greater privacy. Seeing how convenient this was, villagers soon followed suit. Inspired by his example, members of the commune began renovating their own household latrines. Before long, most latrines in Zhaojiahe were rebuilt using brick and stone.

Another incident involved Xi Jinping assisting an elderly man with his cart. On one occasion, while travelling with Xi Jinping to attend a meeting at Fengjiaping Commune, we encountered a man well over seventy years old, bent over and struggling to pull a handcart. I recognised the old man—he was Feng Junde from Fengjiaping. I greeted him, but before I could speak, Xi Jinping stepped forward and said "Old man, at your age, can you still manage the cart?" Feng Junde replied, "I can manage!" Xi Jinping said, "Here, let me help you pull it for a bit!" Feng Junde was indeed exhausted. Seeing this young man offering assistance, he was delighted and replied "That's very kind of you, thank you." Xi Jinping took hold of the cart and began pulling it along.

I asked "Old Feng, what's in your cart?"

Feng Junde said "This is the tobacco leaf I've just harvested from my private plot. I'll take it home to dry." Feng Junde then asked Jinping "Young man, where are you from? I haven't seen you before." Jinping

replied "I'm an educated youth sent from Beijing to Yanchuan. I'm doing line education in Zhaojiahe."

We're

Villagers of Zhaojiahe: Xi Jinping truly is a fine lad.

heading to the commune for a meeting." Feng Junde remarked "A lad from driving this cart!" Xi Jinping replied "Practice makes perfect." Feng Junde then asked "What's your name?" Xi Jinping answered, "My name is Xi Jinping."

Feng Junde remarked "Your surname is Xi? That's not a common name. In my seventy-odd years, I've only known one Xi—our Shaanbei revolutionary, Xi Zhongxun."

Xi Jinping said "Chairman, you know Xi Zhongxun?"

Feng Junde replied, "How could I not know him! Back then, Liu Zhidan and Xi Zhongxun were leading the revolution here in Northern Shaanxi. Liu Zhidan commanded the army as Chairman of the Military Commission; Xi Zhongxun ran the government as Chairman of the People's Government. At your age, he was already **the 'boy chairman'**. Everyone in Northern Shaanxi knows Xi Zhongxun ."

Xi Jinping replied "I am Xi Zhongxun's son." Feng Junde was startled, then exclaimed joyfully, "Good heavens, young man! So you are Xi Zhongxun's son!" The three of us walked and chatted all the way, soon reaching Fengjiaping. Feng Junde and Xi Jinping had conversed throughout the journey, and the two seemed to have become fast friends despite their age difference. Arriving at Feng Junde's doorstep, he invited Xi Jinping and me in for a moment's rest and a drink of water. Xi Jinping replied "No thank you, I must attend a commune meeting. We'll have another chance to chat another time."

From then on, Feng Junde told everyone he met about "Xi Zhongxun's son helping me pull the cart." Each time he recounted the story, he was visibly excited and proud, naturally calling on me to serve as his witness. He declared, "Zhao Shengli from Zhaojiahe saw it—Xi Zhongxun's son helped me pull the cart. Children raised by leaders are truly different!"

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Interviewees: Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu (formerly Zhang Chunfu), both students at Beijing Bayi School, who joined Xi Jinping in Liangjiahe as part of the Down to the Countryside Movement in January 1969. Zhao Hua'an, born in 1953, enlisted in the military at the end of 1970 and worked at the Haidian District Municipal and Landscape Bureau until his retirement. Zhang Chunfu, born in 1952, began working at the Yongping Town Government in Yanchuan County in 1971 and retired in 2012.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview date: 6 June 2016

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu: Xi Jinping is very fond of reading and learning, and also enjoys writing.

Interview Team: Comrades Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu, you were part of the same cohort of educated youth sent to Liangjiahe alongside Xi Jinping. You possess considerable insight into the circumstances of that era. Please recount the situation of educated youth sent to the countryside at that time.

Zhao Hua'an: The sending of educated youth to the countryside was a strategic deployment by Chairman Mao at the time. During the Cultural Revolution, many institutions were unable to function normally, and employment opportunities were extremely limited. Meanwhile, the situation for urban youth and students was one of a large number of graduates and a very severe employment situation. At that time, the education we received was to listen to Chairman Mao. When Chairman Mao told us to go to the countryside and join the rural teams, we went without hesitation.

We travelled to Liangjiahe from Beijing in the same cohort as Xi Jinping. At that time, Xi Jinping, Lei Pingsheng, Dai Ming, Wang Yansheng, and Yang Jingsheng were assigned to Production Team Two, which was **the "rear team."** Zhang Chunfu and I were assigned to Production Team One, **the "front team."** Liangjiahe was a very small village back then, comprising only two production teams in total.

Zhang Chunfu: Indeed. Chairman Mao commanded immense prestige in the hearts of the entire nation. Every word he uttered had a profound impact on us.

Looking back, the down-to-the-countryside movement brought considerable benefits to rural areas: we educated youth introduced novel ideas, relatively advanced lifestyles, and scientific and cultural knowledge. Furthermore, after returning to the cities, we remained deeply attached to the places where we had been stationed, frequently offering support and assistance, which to some extent improved the living standards of our fellow villagers.

The experience also proved highly beneficial for us educated youths personally: in the countryside, we honed our survival skills and our capacity to understand society, gaining a deeper comprehension of the nation's realities and the living conditions of farmers at the grassroots level. This had a profound impact on our lives and provided significant enlightenment.

Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu: Xi Jinping is very fond of reading and learning, and also enjoys writing.

Interview Team: What was the journey like from Beijing to Liangjiahe?

Zhao Hua'an: We departed Beijing Railway Station aboard a special train for educated youth. It was a green-painted carriage, still pulled by a coal-fired steam locomotive. The train was packed with young people, and both those aboard and the relatives and friends seeing them off on the platform shed tears.

We travelled by train to Tongchuan in Shaanxi, where we stayed overnight. The next morning, we boarded military trucks bound for Yan'an. The trucks moved slowly, averaging about 40 kilometres per hour, largely due to the poor road conditions and the large number of passengers crammed into the truck beds. Upon reaching Yan'an, we rested another night before continuing by truck through Yanchuan County to Wen'anyi Commune. As soon as we disembarked, we were met by fellow villagers who had come to greet us. Nearly twenty people from Liangjiahe arrived to help carry our luggage and guide us back to the village.

Interview Team: Moving from the metropolis of Beijing to rural northern Shaanxi, you must have found many aspects quite challenging to adjust to?

Zhao Hua'an: The contrast between life in the capital and the countryside was stark, and it was indeed quite challenging at first. The cave dwellings were infested with lice, fleas, and bedbugs. We sprinkled pesticides like 66 powder and dichlorvos beneath our mattresses, but it didn't solve the problem. We were still bitten all over, covered in welts. Sometimes scorpions, snakes, and other creatures would even crawl into the caves. I was stung by a scorpion once and my calf swelled for days. It was only after a local shared a folk remedy that it healed. The villagers were exceptionally sincere and down-to-earth, yet profoundly wise. Whenever we suffered minor ailments like headaches or fevers, they would offer traditional cures to help us recover. Once, when I had a severe throat infection that left me red, swollen, and nearly voiceless, a villager taught me a remedy: boil an egg, then chill it overnight in the well water.

Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu: Xi Jinping is very fond of reading and learning, and also enjoys writing. and eat it the next day. It actually cured the condition.

Interview Team: I've heard others mention that on one occasion, Xi Jinping went to fetch water at night. After returning, cooking, and eating, he discovered a snake in his meal? Are you aware of this incident?

Zhao Hua'an: I'm not familiar with the specifics of that incident, but such occurrences were entirely plausible in cave dwellings. Snakes would sometimes enter our cave homes, as these earth dwellings provided warmth in winter and coolness in summer, making them attractive to reptiles. I recall one night during a heavy downpour, our landlord's son Wang Xinping came calling: 'Quick, come help! A snake's slithered into our house—it's right on our kang!' I rushed over to find a long snake, about one and a half metres, a red-spotted snake coiled on their kang. Its head was stretched out, flaring its tongue—utterly terrifying. Wang Xinping's family were cowering behind the stove. Without a second thought, I grabbed a quilt and smothered the snake. I intended to kill it to prevent further scares. But Wang Xinping's family insisted it possessed spiritual significance and should be released instead. So, braving the downpour, I carried the snake a long way before tossing it into a ditch. After this incident, the villagers grew even closer to us. Wang Xinping's family treated me like one of their own, showing me extraordinary kindness. Back then, the countryside was very poor, and there wasn't much to eat. Whenever they had any food, they would call me over to share it. Wang Xinping still keeps in touch with us today, and we continue to interact like family. Whenever he comes to Beijing to visit, I always invite him to stay at my home.

Interview Team: Please tell us about your life and work in Liangjiahe.

Zhang Chunfu: At first, we found the rural diet quite unpalatable. The locals made black, sticky rice cakes from bran. Initially, we thought they looked novel and wanted to try them, but

Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu: Xi Jinping is very fond of reading and learning, and also enjoys writing.

After one try, we never wanted them again. Those rice bran dumplings were incredibly dry, almost impossible to swallow, and would get stuck in your throat. At the time, the state provided us educated youth with special grain rations, so we ate slightly better than the local villagers.

Zhao Hua'an: During our rural placement, we lads had to manage our own affairs—tasks like mending clothes we'd never tackled before. When garments tore, we'd fumble with needles and thread, patching holes crookedly without caring for aesthetics—just getting the tears fixed. I once saw Xi Jinping mending one of his own garments. The stitches were rather long, but at least they were fairly neat.

Later, as many educated youths left Liangjiahe, the village merged those from the front and rear teams, housing them all together in a row of youth caves. Wen'anyi held a market—I recall it was three days a fortnight. When Xi Jinping went to the market, passing by our cave entrance, he'd greet us and ask who fancied joining him, so we'd go together. He wasn't one for excessive talk, possessing an easygoing nature and a friendly disposition that drew people to him. Through our interactions, we came to recognise his straightforward character—he spoke plainly, expressing himself with clarity and precision, always in a manner that was both reasonable and considerate.

We usually went to Wen'anyi to buy daily necessities like toothpaste, toothbrushes, and soap, as well as stationery such as envelopes and writing paper. Kerosene also had to be procured in Wen'anyi, though ration tickets were required, limiting purchases to no more than half a jin. Since trips to Wen'anyi were time-consuming, it proved inconvenient whenever we needed something urgently. This was one reason Xi later established a consignment shop in Liangjiahe. With the shop in place, everyone found shopping much more convenient.

Zhang Chunfu: In the early days, Xi Jinping and I worked together in the infrastructure team building dams and terraced fields. While digging earth on the slopes, I observed Xi Jinping hauling soil with a wheelbarrow—he worked with remarkable vigour. Rammed earth construction was gruelling manual labour: four men would grip the four corners of the rammed stone block, while one person in the centre held the handle and drove it downwards. During the dam-building phase, I was stationed halfway up the slope excavating earth. Though the work was exhausting, a single downpour could wash away the entire dam we'd constructed, forcing us to rebuild it repeatedly.

Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu: Xi Jinping is very fond of reading and learning, and also enjoys writing.

the handle to drive it downwards. While Xi Jinping was building the dam, I was excavating soil halfway up the slope. Though dam-building was arduous, a single heavy downpour could wash away the entire structure, forcing us to rebuild it repeatedly. What struck me most profoundly was the ungodly early mornings. We rose at cockcrow, before dawn had even broken, and carried load after load of pig, sheep, and cow dung up the mountain. Back then, we didn't even know how to switch shoulders when carrying the loads. When utterly exhausted, we'd simply set the load down, catch our breath, and hoist it up again.

Interview Team: Please describe the educational activities for educated youth in the countryside at that time.

Zhang Chunfu: During our time in the countryside, socialist education campaigns were frequently organised. We often gathered for evening study sessions, typically every one or two days. All the educated youths would meet and study together. Occasionally, we had to travel to Wen'anyi for meetings. Journeys there required early starts and lengthy walks. Unlike today's meetings with dedicated venues and seating, these gatherings took place in the commune courtyard where everyone stood for one to two hours listening.

During the Socialist Education Movement, we would gather in a cave dwelling, illuminated by oil lamps, to study Chairman Mao's latest directives. Sometimes we would recite the Three Little Essays, other times read newspapers, or discuss the prevailing international and domestic situations. Back then, we never found these studies tedious; we remained quite enthusiastic.

Zhao Hua'an: In the cave dwelling, Xi Jinping would write on the kang table or along the kang's edge. When the weather was warm, he would move a stone, sit upon it, and write leaning over a millstone. His posture was quite interesting: he placed the paper at an angle and wrote with his hand tilted to match the paper's inclination. I tried writing that way once later on and found it rather comfortable. Xi Jinping wrote very neatly, drawing each stroke

Zhao Hua'an and Zhang Chunfu: Xi Jinping is very fond of reading and learning, and also enjoys writing, each character neat and clearly defined.

Xinping was deeply devoted to learning. He loved reading, thinking and writing. He brought many books with him, not only reading them himself but also lending them to fellow educated youths and villagers. He also borrowed books from others and sought out reading material.

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Shaanxi

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Interviewee: Cao Guxi, pen name Guxi. Member of the Chinese Writers' Association. Born in 1941 in a rural village of Qingjian County, Shaanxi Province. Formerly served as Head of the Communications Group for the Yanchuan County Revolutionary Committee, Editor-in-Chief of the literary journal Shan Hua and Yan'an Literature, and Dean of the Lu Yao Academy of Literature. In 1975, he interviewed Xi Jinping, resulting in the reportage piece "The Story of Fire-Taking" on Yanchuan County's large-scale promotion of biogas production.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 23 January 2016

Location: Gu Xi Library, Yan'an City, Shaanxi Province

Interview Team: Hello, Mr Cao! Xi Jinping has mentioned on more than one occasion his experience as a sent-down youth in Liangjiahe, Yancun County, and has also spoken of his interactions with you and Lu Yao. In your view, why do these "old educated youths," represented by him, remain so deeply attached to that period?

Cao Guxi: I am deeply grateful to you all for coming to Yan'an to interview me. During the 1960s and 1970s, I initially served as Youth League Secretary for Jiajiaping Commune in Yanchuan County. When the educated youth arrived, the county appointed me as the "specialist cadre for educated youth" (知识分子). Later, I was transferred to head the Communications Group of the County Revolutionary Committee, which afforded me broader interaction with educated youth across the county. It was precisely during this period that I forged deep friendships with numerous Beijing-born educated youth, including Xi Jinping.

For this generation of educated youth, the experience of "going to the countryside" represented a profound transformation: a shift from relatively privileged urban life to impoverished rural existence, and from carefree students to labouring farmers. This was an immense metamorphosis that virtually none of them had anticipated. These passionate, idealistic youths descended into the countryside, living side-by-side with the most humble farmers. They came to understand the farmers' lives, aspirations, joys, sorrows, and the intricacies of human relationships. This inevitably subjected them to profound psychological and emotional trials, deepening their grasp of our complex national conditions and revealing the very roots and soul of our nation and people. This experience unfolded during the very period when their worldviews and values were taking shape. Thus, their sense of duty and responsibility took root and flourished on the loess plateaus of western China; the flame of the ideal to "revive China" was kindled in the soil of their hearts.

In my interactions with these educated youths, I witnessed the hope of the Chinese nation and the future of the People's Republic.

In 1997, in an article published in the combined second and third issues of Yan'an Literature, I could not help but write these words:

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi

constitute the most valuable asset of his life

I wonder if dear readers have ever followed the fate and growth journey of the "**old**

Third Cohort"

? This

cohort, forged in extraordinary historical circumstances, possesses unique courage, temperament, and character. They endured the unprecedented proletarian "Cultural Revolution," then went en masse to the countryside to settle as "down-to-the-countryside youth," undergoing "**re-education**" by the poor and lower-middle peasants. Subsequently, some were recruited as workers, cadres, or soldiers; others were recommended for university admission; and still others went abroad to study. In short, those who could leave did so, with only a handful remaining as genuine farmers.

For historical reasons, this cohort prematurely lost their opportunity for education. Consequently, whenever they gained access to books, they threw themselves into reading with fierce determination. One Beijing-born educated youth who served as deputy provincial party secretary had read Capital three times before entering university, compiling eighteen thick notebooks of reading notes. Compared to their fathers' generation, this cohort was less conservative and dogmatic; compared to those younger than them, they possessed a stronger sense of mission, engaged in more critical thinking, and demonstrated greater practical action. Amidst societal transformation and epochal change, this generation represents the hope of our nation and people, serving as the bridge between centuries!

Xi Jinping was one such member of the educated youth contingent. In early 1969, not yet sixteen, he arrived at Liangjiahe Village in Yanchuan County. He remained in this small mountain hamlet until October 1975, spending the most precious years of his youth in the harsh rural landscapes of northern Shaanxi. This period of rural placement brought him considerable hardship and suffering, yet this life experience became the most valuable asset of his entire existence. His enduring affection for the loess plateau that nurtured him and his deep attachment to the farmers and villagers of northern Shaanxi demonstrate that he is both a man of feeling and a man of conviction—a loyal son of the loess plateau.

Interview Team: As one of the "passionate youths" among the educated youth sent to the countryside at that time, what set him apart?

Cao Guxi: Most of that cohort of educated youth were contemporaries of the Republic, the first generation to

emerge from the educational system after the founding of New China.

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi constitute the most valuable asset of his life

. They were generally idealistic and ambitious, possessing a sense of responsibility for the nation and a willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the country's prosperity.

Like his peers, Xi Jinping worked diligently and proactively, striving to improve the living conditions and circumstances of the people in northern Shaanxi through practical deeds within his capacity. However, due to the repercussions of his father's "**problems**," his enthusiasm initially met with indifference and suspicion rather than support or recognition.

Shortly after the educated youth arrived in the village, Xi Jinping visited a friend in Xiayi Village. Someone reported this to Shi Huannan, the group leader of the educated youth: Was he coming to engage in some sort of "collusion"?

Subsequently, Xi Jinping applied for Party membership on multiple occasions, yet his applications were repeatedly delayed...

The "Peng-Gao-Xi Anti-Party Clique"! In that era where "class struggle was the guiding principle," ~~was~~ was an invisible sword of death—who wouldn't be terrified?!

Where others began building their lives ~~from scratch~~, Xi Jinping started from ~~a~~ ~~deficit~~; while others could erect towers on level ground, he first had to fill the pits beneath his feet and lay solid foundations before any construction could begin. Yet harsh realities did not crush him. Instead, they forged a steadier, more resilient character, endowing him with a more diligent spirit of learning and a tenacious will to strive than his peers possessed.

If one were to identify Xi Jinping's distinguishing traits from other educated youths, I would highlight three: firstly, his birth into a high-ranking official family granted him a broad perspective; secondly, his revolutionary family background instilled firm political ideals; thirdly, his placement as an educated youth during the Cultural Revolution cultivated a profound understanding of the common people and a strong sense of the rule of law. Before arriving at Zhaojiahe, he worked diligently without much fanfare, actively sought advancement, studied assiduously, and prioritised earning a position equal to others.

Like other educated youths, Xi ate and lived alongside the farmers, performing the same

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi
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Each educated youth had differing ideals and lifestyles, naturally adapting to rural life to varying degrees. Upon first arriving in Liangjiahe, he too found many aspects of the arduous rural existence challenging. Yet he adjusted, quickly putting down roots in the countryside, blending seamlessly with the local farmers and becoming one with them. He left deep footprints on the loess plateau of northern Shaanxi, and in my memory too, he left many fine impressions. He was a truly down-to-earth educated youth who integrated into rural life.

The people of Yan'an, just as they had generously welcomed that exhausted Red Army force in years past, now welcomed nearly thirty thousand Beijing educated youths. This was a vast cohort. Many among them could not endure the hardships of rural life and sought every means to leave after only a few months.

On one occasion, I submitted an article titled "Twenty-Six Sunflowers Blooming Towards the Sun" about the Liujiagou Brigade of Jiajiaping Commune to the county broadcasting station. Unexpectedly, before the piece could be aired, twenty-five educated youths "**went AWOL**" overnight. Brigade cadres rushed to Suide that very night, speaking many kind words before finally retrieving them. Some persisted for a year or two, only to eventually leave by leveraging various connections.

In 1973, both the commune and county authorities recommended Xi Jinping for university admission. However, due to his family background, neither he nor Wang Hanguang were accepted that year.

Though Xi's university dream was dashed, unexpected good fortune came his way in Liangjiahe. First, the commune's Communist Youth League committee approved his admission to the League, followed swiftly by approval for Party membership. The Yanchuan County Party Committee then selected him for the Socialist Line Education Work Team. Assigned to work alongside Tao Haisu, the county Youth League secretary, they were stationed at the Zhaojiahe Brigade of Fengjiaping Commune. Tao Haisu, also an educated youth, had graduated from Tsinghua High School. In 1970, he was recruited as a full-time cadre by the Political Work Group of the Yanchuan County Revolutionary Committee and later became the county Youth League Committee Secretary. He and Xi Jinping were close friends who frequently interacted.

One day in early spring 1973, Tao Haisu, Xi Jinping and two other educated youths came to seek me out,

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asking me to take their photograph. Standing before a low wall in the second row of the Yanchuan County Revolutionary Committee compound, I captured their image using the county's sole Shanghai-brand camera, valued at 180 yuan. At that time, the communications unit also possessed a darkroom equipped with a **Pujiang-brand** enlarger, to which I alone held the key. The original photograph was a small 6cm × 6cm square. I personally cropped and enlarged it into a 5cm × 7cm rectangular print before presenting it to Tao Haisu. He later had this group photograph made into a birthday card and gifted it to Xi Jinping.

After the Cultural Education campaign group assignments were announced, Tao Haisu told Xi Jinping "I am the team leader, you are the team member; I am the nominal head, you are the resident officer; any achievements will be yours, any problems will be entirely my responsibility."

In truth, Xi Jinping's talents first came to light not during his rural placement in Liangjiahe, but while leading the Socialist Education Movement in Zhaojiahe.

Interview Team: You mentioned that Xi Jinping's talents first came to light during his work on the Socialist Education Movement in Zhaojiahe. Could you elaborate on the specific tasks he undertook there?

Cao Guxi: Indeed, Zhaojiahe was where Xi Jinping first demonstrated his talents. Being assigned to lead the educational campaign signified he was no ordinary educated youth; it granted him influence over the brigade's operations and the production and livelihoods of its people. He threw himself wholeheartedly into his work, leading by example and demanding that whatever he required of others, he would first accomplish himself. This exemplary conduct generated tremendous momentum.

Xi Jinping's period of on-site education in Zhaojiahe was relatively brief, lasting just over eight months. Yet his achievements were remarkably outstanding, highlighting his exceptional organisational and coordination skills while fully demonstrating his pragmatic, hands-on approach to work. He not only oversaw administrative tasks such as document dissemination, the restructuring of the brigade leadership, and the appointment of production team cadres, but also participated in

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi

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He insisted on working alongside farmers to construct terraced fields, build earthen dams, and plant trees...

During my visit to Zhaojiahe, I conversed with elderly villagers. They remarked that Xi Jinping conducted meetings differently from other cadres. At others' gatherings, while he spoke, villagers below would puff on their pipes, exchange idle chatter, or mend shoe soles – scarcely anyone listened. Each meeting commenced in disarray and concluded in confusion. Yet when Xi Jinping addressed the assembly, all fell silent to hear him, engaging actively in discussion.

I inquired "Why is that?"

An old man replied "Xiping never utters empty words or boasts. What he says is what we want to express; what he does addresses our immediate concerns. That's why we all listen to him."

In Zhaojiahe, there was a farmer named Wu Gangwen, nicknamed "Suiwa," who was very close to Xi Jinping. He was a sharp and capable young man. Take sheep herding, for instance—a task not particularly demanding, yet he did it better than anyone else. He trained his flock to be exceptionally obedient. His flock grazed only on wild grasses, scattered beans, and millet ears. Even when driven past cultivated fields, not a single sheep dared nibble the crops. Through spring sowing, summer weeding, autumn harvesting, and winter storing, Suiwa proved **an unrivalled master craftsman** (Shaanxi dialect for expert or specialist) in every farm task. He possessed a fierce spirit, never shirking collective labour or shirking heavy tasks. He was strategic, adept at planning, and possessed leadership skills, commanding great popularity among the villagers.

In the early sixties, Suíwá became production team leader in his teens, driving production to flourish and earning the villagers' deep support. In the spring of 1965, the county Party secretary, accompanied by two other officials, carried their bicycles over the mountains from Qingpingchuan to inspect Zhaojiakou. Coincidentally, as they entered the village boundaries, they witnessed Suiwa leading members in reclaiming a barren plot. In those times, collective land reclamation by production team cadres constituted a grave policy violation. The county secretary abruptly set down his bicycle and demanded in a stern voice, "Who is the team leader?" He then rebuked Suiwa for his "utter audacity" in daring to "take the lead in reclaiming land."

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collectively clearing wasteland was a grave violation of policy. The county secretary flung his bicycle aside and demanded sternly "Who is the team leader?" He then berated Suiwa for his "utter audacity" in daring to "lead the way in land reclamation, indulging in capitalist practices" A barrage of accusations rained down upon him.

Suíwá was stubborn by nature. He saw nothing wrong with reclaiming land, growing more grain, and ensuring everyone had enough to eat. Refusing to back down, he ended up in a heated argument with the county Party secretary, shouting back at him. Soon after, Suíwá was dismissed from his position as team leader by the commune.

Following Suiwa's "dismissal," grain yields in Zhaojiakou immediately declined, failing to match his levels for several consecutive years.

In that era when grain production was paramount, this was no small matter for the villagers of Zhaojiakou. But Suiwa was stubborn as a mule. He dug his heels in, vowing never to take up the post of production team leader again!

In 1973, Xi Jinping arrived at Zhaojiakou to serve as a resident cadre. Learning of Suiwa's dismissal ~~of his post~~, he resolved to persuade him to resume his role as production team leader. Xi Jinping sought him out for talks on the first day, but failed to convince him. The next day, Xi Jinping approached him again, yet Suiwa still shook his head. On the third day, Xi summoned Suiwa to his cave office and talked through the entire night. He repeatedly reasoned: "Increasing grain yields is right, but reclaiming land to boost production violates policy. Holding a grudge over dismissal—is that how a man should behave?"

Xi's patience and sincerity moved Suiwa, who finally agreed cheerfully "It can be done! I'll take up the post of production team leader once more."

At the time, some villagers quipped: "That Xi Jinping lad's got real fire in him! How else could he have boiled Suwa's 'ox-head' (Shaanxi dialect for stubborn as an ox's head, meaning unyielding)?"

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Once Suiwa took charge, the brigade's atmosphere transformed overnight. Not long ago, I revisited Zhaojiakou and called on Suiwa. He still lives in the same cave dwelling Xi Jinping occupied over forty years ago—the very one where they conversed through the night.

Tao Haisu and I were both colleagues in the Political Work Group of the County Revolutionary Committee and friends for over thirty years. In 2013, I accompanied him on a return visit to Zhaojiahe. We reminisced about Xi Jinping's time working there. Tao recalled one occasion when he visited Zhaojiahe and found Xi Jinping renovating an old toilet.

Tao Haisu said "Xi Jinping, you're not up to this job." Xi Jinping replied "Toilet has been neglected for years—someone has to fix it" In northern Shaanxi, many rural villages shared a single unisex latrine. When someone was inside and heard another approaching, they would cough to signal their presence. The newcomer would then avoid using it, creating considerable inconvenience and often leading to awkward situations. Xi Jinping not only refurbished this "dilapidated" latrine but also transformed it into the first ever gender-segregated toilet in the history of Zhaojiahe Village.

The cave dwelling where Xi Jinping once resided during his political education days is now Suíwá's home. Suíwá has whitewashed the earthen walls, dismantled the central beam at the rear of the dwelling, replacing it with willow rafters and strapping, and added a refrigerator and colour television. The large earthen dam Xi Jinping helped build alongside the villagers has become a high-yield field resistant to both drought and flooding. I witnessed the corn thriving within its embankments. The saplings they planted have grown into towering trees, before which the villagers erected a green stone stele inscribed "Forest of the Educated Youth". Regrettably, that "separate-gender toilet" was demolished by bulldozers during road widening.

Xi Jinping's achievements in the line education campaign earned him the praise of the villagers of Zhaojiahe and the recognition of the commune. When the line education concluded, Zhao Tingbi, Party Secretary of Fengjiaping Commune, wished to retain him as Party Secretary of Zhaojiahe

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi constitute the most valuable asset of his life

He declined.

Bai Guangxing, Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune, retorted "You wish How could we part with our talent" Immediately after the Socialist Education Movement concluded, the Party Committee of Wen'anyi Commune appointed Xi Jinping as Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Village.

The loess plateau of northern Shaanxi provided Xi Jinping with a new platform. For him, this was both a fresh test and a new opportunity to improve and temper himself...

Interview Team: During his time in the countryside, Xi Jinping worked while also reading voraciously. Could you describe how he read and what books he read?

Cao Guxi: That's an excellent question. Xi Jinping's most enduring impression on me was his passionate love of reading.

Through my extensive interviews over many years, locations, and with numerous individuals, I learned that Xi regarded reading as indispensable as eating and drinking—an equally vital part of daily life. During breaks from farm work, while others rested in the fields—men either gathering to smoke pipe tobacco or heading to hollows to chop firewood and dig for pig fodder—Women would find moments to sew shoe soles or do needlework. Xi Jinping, however, would always use these spare moments to immerse himself in reading. When herding sheep on the mountains, he would drive them to graze on the slopes while he sat on the hillside reading. Every evening, he would read by the light of a kerosene lamp until late into the night...

From what I understand, he was the most avid reader among the educated youth at that time. Whenever he came to Yancun County town, I would always see him carrying a bulging satchel full of books. He constantly sought out books to read, wherever and whenever possible. His reading was remarkably wide-ranging: Chinese and foreign works, ancient and modern texts, philosophy, literature, natural sciences... He delved particularly deeply into books on political theory.

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I have a friend named Lu Beijiang who returned to his hometown after university to become a village Party secretary. He recounted: "In May 1975, I attended the Yanchuan County Knowledge Youth Activists' Congress. Seeing Xi Jinping's satchel laden with books, I asked to borrow one. Without hesitation, he pulled out Shen Kuo's Dream Pool Essays."¹¹

I heard that to find Goethe's Faust, he walked over thirty miles before finally borrowing a copy. What astonished me even more was that he not only read classic works from ancient and modern times, both Chinese and foreign, but also included in his reading the literary journal Mountain Flowers, founded by literary youths like myself and Lu Yao.

founded by literary youths like myself and Lu Yao.

I greatly admire Gorky's observation "Next only to choosing good friends is choosing good books!"¹²

Through interviews and research into Xi Jinping's seven-year experience in Yan'an, observing his growth journey, I grasped this truth "Success is the achievement of the individual. Yet without the opportunities for success or the indispensable external conditions, success remains an empty phrase. However, opportunities are not distributed equally to everyone; they are offered only to those who are prepared." Xi Jinping was such a prepared individual! During his time in the countryside, facing the hardships and trials of that unique historical period, Xi Jinping did not resist or complain. Instead, he confronted difficulties head-on and strived diligently. He devoted himself to reading during his rural placement, enriching his knowledge and enhancing his cultural cultivation. Through hands-on labour, he cultivated his character.

hardships and trials of that era, Xi Jinping did not resist or complain. Instead, he rose to the challenge and strove diligently. He devoted himself to studying, enriching his knowledge and enhancing his cultural literacy. Through hands-on labour and by serving as a village cadre, he led his fellow villagers in transforming the village's landscape. This experience equipped Xi Jinping with substantial intellectual reserves and rich practical experience.

As Mencius stated "When one is in adversity, one cultivates oneself; when one is in prosperity, one benefits all under heaven." Indeed, without first cultivating oneself, how could one possibly benefit all under heaven?

Interview Team: In 1975, you penned a reportage entitled "The Fire-Making Expedition: The People of Yanchuan County Launching a Mass Campaign..."

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi constitute the most valuable asset of his life

Biogas Chronicles, published on the front page of the Yan'an News on 20 September that year. This report authentically recounts Xi Jinping's efforts in leading the masses to overcome difficulties and construct biogas digesters. Could you elaborate on why he chose to develop biogas digesters in northern Shaanxi at that time?

Cao Guxi: Today's youth find it hard to comprehend the concept of "biogas utilisation". Why not use electric lighting? Why not cook with natural gas or induction hobs? Indeed, it's difficult for younger generations to grasp why Xi Jinping prioritised biogas development back then.

Historically, northern Shaanxi has endured persistent drought with scarce rainfall. A "Rain-Praying Song" passed down through generations tells of dried-up streams and rivers, mountains ablaze with scorched fields, and withered crops...

Women wept, men cried out, old men and children knelt along the riverbank: O Dragon King, send us sweet rain! O Dragon King, save the people!

Generation after generation, year after year, the mountain folk's devout prayers and solemn sacrifices proved futile. Spring saw seeds of hope carefully sown into the loess soil, yet the harvest was often the unbridled fury of autumn winds...

I distinctly recall that even in the 1960s, this couplet still circulated in northern Shaanxi:

Well-dressed and swift on foot, But stomachs filled with sour cabbage...

During Xi Jinping's years of rural placement, he witnessed how the people of northern Shaanxi suffered not only from severe food shortages but also struggled to find firewood for cooking.

When cattle defecated, they would quickly scoop it up by hand, spread it on earthen walls to dry, and use it as firewood. Each summer when mountain torrents raged, men would wield two- or three-metre-long river-wood scoops, risking their lives to salvage driftwood swept down from the ravines. Scoop by scoop they retrieved it, basket by basket hauled it to the riverbank, where it was dried on stone slabs for fuel. My fifty-eight-year-old father perished while gathering river wood

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and swept away by the torrent. Fellow villagers chased fifteen li to recover his body...

Comrade Ai Ping, who served as China's Ambassador to Ethiopia and Deputy Minister of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, was a Beijing educated youth sent to work in the Erba Jia Brigade of Guanzhuang Commune, Yanchuan County. His commune lay just across the mountain from Liangjiahe, where Xi Jinping was stationed. In a memoir he wrote "What left a deep impression was how difficult it was to secure food Back then, water had to be fetched from wells by the river. During the rainy season, the wells would be flooded, leaving us without water for days on end. Firewood had to be chopped in the mountains. A day's work yielded barely enough for a few meals. The village had no steel mills, so we had to queue to use the brigade's animals to grind grain. If we couldn't get a turn, we had to push ~~handed~~ ^{handed} ourselves - •"

Here, another true story emerges, even more baffling!

One year, a cadre visiting a peasant household for a "communal meal" ~~the~~ the noodles ~~in~~ when suddenly the fire died out. There was no more cow dung or sheep dung left. The woman quickly removed her own cloth shoes, placed them in the stove's firebox, and pumped the bellows with all her might. Finally, the noodles were cooked. I do not know whether Xi Jinping heard this tale of "**burning shoes to cook noodles**" during his time in Yan'an, but I deeply understand his earnest efforts in pioneering biogas.

On 21st September 1975, I published "The Story of Fire" in the Yan'an Correspondence. The newspaper attached great importance to this report. Comrade Li Bin, the editor-in-chief, personally wrote an editorial titled "Promote the Use of ~~B~~ with Great Effort" dedicating two full pages to detailing the "biogas revolution" initiated by Xi Jinping in Liangjiahe. The article stated:

Fire was the first natural force conquered by humankind. From the ancient myths of drilling wood to produce fire, to the utilisation of coal, oil, natural gas and solar energy, humanity has waged a gruelling struggle spanning hundreds of thousands of years to harness fire and secure fuel sources—a struggle that has continually propelled human civilisation and progress! Today, the promotion and utilisation of biogas unfolding on the Loess Plateau of northern Shaanxi and along the banks of the Yellow River represents yet another

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi
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new chapter in this struggle...

On 18 January 1974, a People's Daily report detailing Sichuan's biogas initiative stirred the hearts of countless readers. That night, Xi Jinping—a Beijing-born educated youth stationed in Yanchuan County's Liangjiahe Brigade of Wen'anyi Commune—studied the article by the dim light of a kerosene lamp. His mind raced with excitement, keeping him awake long into the night. He thought: How wonderful it would be if our mountainous region—with its poor transport links, scarcity of coal and firewood, and lack of electricity—could use biogas for cooking and lighting, just like Sichuan! He walked over fifty li along mountain paths to Yancuan County town and shared his idea of travelling to Sichuan to learn biogas production with Comrade Zhang Zhisun, a Beijing cadre assigned to Yancuan, member of the County Party Standing Committee, and Deputy Director of the County Revolutionary Committee. Old Zhang chuckled: "Little Xi, we've both found a path forward!"

On 1 April, following recommendations from Comrade Zhang and others, the County Party Committee decided to dispatch six comrades from relevant departments to Sichuan to "gain expertise." Young Xi was among them.

In early May, the full Standing Committee heard reports from the comrades returning from Sichuan. Based on Yanchuan's varied geography, four sites—including the county farm and Liangjiahe—were selected for biogas trials. As Xi Jinping and his team broke ground, cynics remarked: If biogas could light light lamps or cook meals it'll be like hens crowing and roosters laying eggs! Some even declared Biogas won't make it past the Qinling Mountains! Xi Jinping rallied his comrades: "We stand before difficulties, but difficulties stand before none of us!" Building the tanks required sand, which Liangjiahe lacked. Comrade Xi Jinping then led several young people to Fifteen miles away at Qianmagou they went to dig. When cement for the pool couldn't be transported into the valley, he led the way again, carrying it back from the commune fifteen miles distant. Lacking lime, they set up their own lime kiln...

Interview Team: What difficulties arose during the biogas digester construction? How did Xi Jinping overcome them? What impact did the completed digesters have?

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi constitute the most valuable asset of his life

Cao Guxi: During the biogas digester construction, Xi Jinping served both as commander and technician, personally resolving every obstacle. In those days, the quality of building materials and construction precision were vastly inferior to today's standards. Cracks in the newly built biogas digester allowed liquid to seep into the ground, preventing chemical reactions with raw materials like manure and thus halting biogas production. To repair it, Xi led several young people in emptying the digester of all water and manure. They then descended into the pit, using torches to locate cracks, flushing them clean with water, and meticulously patching them with cement. In the sweltering summer heat, the digester was unbearably foul-smelling, pitch-black, and suffocatingly stifling. Such gruelling, filthy work would likely deter many from undertaking it.

Once these faults were rectified, the digester soon resumed normal gas production. By mid-July 1974, the digester was successfully ignited, lighting the first biogas lamp on the northern Shaanxi plateau in Liangjiahe. This achievement decisively disproved the fallacy that "biogas cannot cross the Qinling Mountains." The entire Yanchuan County was abuzz with excitement. Local mountain villagers, having witnessed the tangible benefits of biogas production, flocked to Liangjiahe **to learn the techniques**. Overnight, the biogas digester became a demonstration site, thronged from dawn till dusk by curious visitors from neighbouring villages. Xi Jinping and several comrades involved in its construction repeatedly explained the process of biogas production and its advantages to the crowds. Day after day, they patiently demonstrated its use to visitors—simply turning the switch , striking a match, and watching the bulb glow brighter than a 60-watt electric lamp. Igniting the biogas in the stove, a blue flame roared beneath the pot. The fire proved remarkably potent; within minutes, half a pot of cold water bubbled and boiled.

The first biogas digester constructed by Xi Jinping in Shaanxi ignited a sweeping biogas revolution across Yanchuan County. The Yanchuan County Revolutionary Committee convened **a "Biogas Field Conference"** in Liangjiahe. On 16 August,

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the Yanchuan County Party Committee commended Xi Jinping and the Liangjiahe Brigade Party Branch he led in the eighth issue of Yanchuan Situation.

On 23 August 1975, Document No. 9 of the Yanchuan County Communist Youth League Committee designated him as an "Advanced Youth," calling on all county youth to learn from his example.

On 22 August 1975, Shaanxi Province convened a biogas promotion and utilisation field conference in Yanchuan County. After delegates inspected biogas pits in Liangjiahe and Shangyi, a stage was erected beneath an ancient locust tree in Shangyi's educated youth compound to serve as the meeting venue. Xi Jinping, Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe Brigade, delivered an experience-sharing presentation titled "Biogas Policies Must Be Implemented".

At that conference, students from the Political Evening School of Wen'anyi Shangyi Brigade performed cultural programmes for the delegates, including the Northern Shaanxi storytelling piece "Four Wives Praise Biogas," the song "Biogas Flowers Bloom in the Mountain Village," and Northern Shaanxi Yangko folk dances. Chai Fuhua, Deputy Secretary of the Commune Youth League Committee, Secretary of the Shangyi Brigade Youth League Branch, and Captain of the "Iron Maiden **Combat Team**," informed me that she composed the clapper-rhythm piece "She Way to Promote Biogas!"

The provincial biogas conference convened at Wen'anyi,
Yanchuan. Provincial, prefectural, and county leaders
inspected the site, With joyous songs and laughter filling the
valley!

Beijing-born educated youth Xi Jinping, He shares our common
folk's heartfelt care. He journeyed to Sichuan to learn the trade,
Now biogas lamps light our mountain villages. Wen'anyi
Commune issued the decree: Spread biogas production from
pilot sites. By day we terraced fields and built dams, By night we
dug pits and applied plaster. Cooking was once such a chore,
Now we simply turn a switch.

Since we introduced biogas, women's liberation has
spurred production. Everyone pitches in to build biogas
facilities—self-reliance proves most economical.

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Lighting lamps and cooking meals requires less effort,
while biogas fertiliser benefits the collective. Biogas
lamps illuminate night schools,
where members study culture by lamplight.

Technical training takes precedence, and biogas flourishes throughout the county!

Chai Fuhua recounted that she personally took to the stage to perform, receiving praise from conference delegates and commendations from the commune and county authorities.

From 15th to 21st July 1975, the Yan'an Prefectural Committee convened the Advanced Conference on Agricultural Learning from Dazhai for Educated Youth in the Region, commending outstanding collectives and individuals. Xi Jinping, then Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Brigade, was honoured as an advanced individual. Alongside over 20 educated youth from Beijing and Yanchuan County, he attended this conference with distinction and received solemn commendation.

Xi Jinping's endeavour to overcome numerous obstacles in leading villagers to construct a biogas digester may, in itself, appear merely a minor trial in his life's journey. Yet the subsequent impact of this single act proved profound, resonating across the entire province of Shaanxi at the time. Thus, one must never underestimate the significance of seemingly minor tasks in one's work. Those who accomplish great deeds invariably grow through wholeheartedly executing each small task, while one's character is forged precisely through these seemingly ordinary endeavours. At that time, Xi Jinping's motivation for constructing the biogas digester may well have been to bring warmth and light to the villagers of Liangjiahe, sparing the womenfolk the drudgery of gathering firewood for cooking. This spirit was continually refined throughout his subsequent administrative practice at various levels of leadership, ultimately crystallising into the people-centred ethos encapsulated by the phrase: "Worry before the people worry, enjoy after the people enjoy."

Interview Team: Following your visit to Liangjiahe, you authored "The Story of Fire," which provided the earliest account of Xi Jinping's efforts to lead villagers in constructing biogas pits during his time there. This work played a significant role in promoting biogas development across Shaanxi Province.

Cao Guxi: Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi constitute the most valuable asset of his life

. Could you share any particularly memorable experiences from that reporting assignment?

Cao Guxi: At that time, I had been transferred to the Communications Unit of the Yan'an Regional Revolutionary Committee. Shen Yang, the Party Secretary of Yanchuan County, knew I was familiar with the county's situation and possessed extensive information. He specifically called me back from Yan'an to Yanchuan to report on the biogas revolution Xi Jinping had initiated in Yanchuan County.

One particular incident during that assignment remains vividly etched in my memory. Secretary Shen Yang had arranged for a jeep to transport me to Liangjiahe for the interview. At the village entrance, the jeep forded a river, with a dirt embankment rising on the opposite bank. The tyres were caked with mud, causing them to spin uselessly as we attempted to ascend the slope. At that moment, Xi Jinping, who had come to greet us, called over several young men. Together, they pushed the vehicle from behind. ~~the~~ The strapping lads propelled the jeep into the courtyard where the educated youth resided. It was a minor incident, and over the years, I gradually forgot about it.

In 2012, I came across a report: On 21 August, then Vice-President Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the 28th General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union at the Beijing National Convention Centre. As Xi concluded his address, Robert Williams, President of the International Astronomical Union, approached to shake hands and offer congratulations. At that moment, he accidentally dropped his spectacles onto the floor. Xi proactively bent down, retrieved the spectacles, and returned them to Mr Williams. The two men shook hands warmly once more, drawing enthusiastic applause from the audience.

Upon seeing this report and the accompanying photographs, I was deeply moved and suddenly recalled the time he had helped me push my cart.

Decades later, Xi Jinping remains as down-to-earth and approachable as ever. Whether as a brigade secretary in 1975 or as Vice President in 2012, his sincerity towards others and his

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I believe that when an official willingly stoops to the level of ordinary people, he will inevitably be looked up to by more

I believe that an official who willingly stoops to assist ordinary folk will inevitably be looked up to by many more. As Sima Qian wrote in his Records of the Grand Historian The Genealogy of Duke Zhou of Lu during the Western Han Dynasty "When a ruler is approachable, the people will surely rally to him . . ."

That day, when I interviewed Xi Jinping in Liangjiahe, we spoke at length. During the conversation, he spoke at great length about the "contributions" of the masses, but when it came to himself, he spoke little and simply. I thought to myself "This young man, who does not take credit for his achievements and remains modest and prudent, is truly an extraordinary person."

Shortly afterwards, Beijing allocated one 130 utility vehicle and one three-wheeled motorbike to Yanchuan County. The county authorities decided to award the utility vehicle to Sun Lizhe's cooperative medical station and the motorbike to Xi Jinping, the Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe.

Upon hearing the news, everyone rejoiced—except Xi Jinping. He remarked, "What use is this to us? It can't haul much, nor can it work the fields. Am I supposed to ride it about for pleasure every day?" He immediately entrusted Liang Yuming, the veteran Party secretary of Liangjiahe, to exchange the tricycle motorbike for agricultural machinery like a hand-guided tractor at the Yan'an Agricultural Machinery Company.

In those days, do you realise how vital and precious such agricultural machinery was to a production brigade?

Ding Aidie, Party Secretary of Zhangjiahe Brigade in Guanzhuang Commune, was also an educated youth sent to Beijing. At the time, a walk-behind tractor cost over 3,000 yuan, but the brigade had no funds. He led several strong young men to work as **temporary coal miners** at the small Yangjiaping coal mine fifteen miles away. The mine's equipment was extremely rudimentary: an eighty-metre-deep vertical shaft housed only a five-horsepower diesel engine to transport workers and haul coal. Miners worked without lamps, instead hanging oil lamps from their cloth caps

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in a pot, crawling and labouring in tunnels barely 80 to 90 centimetres high. Clothing was impractical underground; lying beneath the face, they mined coal by wriggling their hips. Within hours, their tender skin became a bloody mess from rubbing against the rock, the pain excruciating. Not only was coal mining arduous, but hauling it out was even more gruelling. A thick hemp rope slung over their shoulders, they dragged coal carts weighing hundreds of pounds behind them. Using only their palms, knees, and toes in coordinated effort, they crawled forward like enormous snails...

“They gritted their teeth and toiled for over ten days until they finally scraped ~~through~~ a hand-guided tractor.” Ding Aidie recounted to me. “A female educated youth named Wang Hansheng insisted on joining the coal mining. Women weren't permitted in the mines. She sneaked into the small coal pit once, witnessed our plight, and returned home so distraught she wept for three days and nights. Wang Hansheng later joined the Party and became an associate professor at Renmin University of China, but sadly passed away from illness a couple of years ago.”

This is what people call the "educated youth years"!

These were the educated youth friends I made during that era!

Interview Team: Xi Jinping spent seven years as a sent-down youth in Yan'an, forging deep bonds with this land and its people. He once described himself as “a son of the yellow earth.” When he returned to Liangjiahe on 13 July 2015, he greeted villagers by name, sitting among them to chat about everyday matters. He remarked: “Though I left this place years ago, my heart remained here.” Could you share your personal observations to help us understand this profound connection?

Cao Guxi: In October 1975, Xi Jinping was recommended for university admission. Just as villagers once saw off loved ones to the front lines for battle, every household in Liangjiahe invited him to dine. The Zhang family offered a bowl of pumpkin seeds; the Li family presented a packet of large red dates. Several aunts and sisters-in-law gifted him meticulously embroidered floral shoe pads... As he departed, the entire village—men, women, and children—escorted him to the Liangjiahe ravine

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and selected thirteen representatives, including Liang Yuming and Shi Chunyang, to accompany him all the way to the county town.

On the eve of his departure from Yanchuan, Shen Yang, the county party secretary, invited Xi Jinping to his home, where his wife personally prepared him "red-striped **pork**" — **a traditional dish** eaten during the New Year celebrations in northern Shaanxi.

General Secretary Xi Jinping has often stated that he is "a son of the yellow earth," with his "roots in Shaanxi and his soul in Yan'an." I suspect many may struggle to grasp the full depth of this sentiment.

I have often remarked that Northern Shaanxi is not merely a geographical concept, but more significantly a cultural one. The Yellow River, the Great Wall, and the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor – symbols of the Chinese national spirit – converge remarkably upon this loess plateau. Thus, amidst its stark, bare mountains, an ancient and mystical cultural aura pervades. Chinese people both at home and abroad regard this land as their "spiritual **homeland**." Whether native Shaanbei residents or outsiders who have dedicated themselves to this land, as long as their hearts beat in unison with its pulse, this land will bestow upon them wisdom, courage, and fortitude. Whether statesmen, military strategists, or literary and artistic figures, all can achieve tremendous success here.

Xi Jinping speaks of his roots here, yet in truth, the very roots of the Chinese nation lie here! During the arduous revolutionary war years, Yan'an and the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region served as the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the main rear base for China's War of Liberation. Under the leadership of Chairman Mao and the Party Central Committee, with "millet and rifles," they defeated the enemy's aircraft and artillery. The new China strode forth from the banks of the Yan River to Tiananmen Square!

The Yan'an Spirit embodies the very soul of the Chinese nation! From an article about Xi Zhongxun, I learned that he once carried an ailing old man to hospital, purchased medicine for a woman in labour, and helped a sanitation worker push a refuse cart... He performed countless such acts of kindness, extending a helping hand whenever he encountered people in need. It is evident that these qualities in Xi Jinping

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inherited the noble character of his forebears.

In a poem about General Liu Zhidan's hometown, I once wrote thus:

The bonfires of that era burn brightly in the hearts of the Red Army's descendants!

In Xi Jinping's professional and personal life, there must always have stood a towering figure before him—his father.

Interview Team: Did you maintain contact with Xi Jinping after he left Yan'an?

Cao Guxi: Yes, we remained in touch. When Xi served as a member of the Xiamen Municipal Party Committee and Vice Mayor, I once visited Xiamen on business and made a detour to see him, though unfortunately he was absent. He later wrote me a letter. It read something like "my time in Yan'an provided invaluable training and education. Since leaving, I have deeply missed Yan'an and often long to return for a visit."

In 1993, Xi Jinping returned to Yan'an. After a full eighteen years apart, we were overjoyed to reunite. At the Yan'an Hotel, he clasped my hands and asked,"Are you keeping well?"

At the site of the former

"Small Auditorium of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee"

in Zao Yuan, Yan'an, they posed for a photograph with Zhang Zhiqing, then Commissioner of the Yan'an Administrative Office, and Shen Yang, Secretary of the Commission for Discipline Inspection (formerly Secretary of the Yancun County Party Committee).

By June 2003, I had stepped down from my role as Editor-in-Chief of Yan'an Literature and was involved in compilation of the Suide Literary Collection. During the War of Resistance, Comrade Xi Zhongxun served as Secretary of the CPC Suide Prefectural Committee and published numerous articles in the Dazhong Daily. Regarding the inclusion of Comrade Xi's works in the Suide Literary Collection, I wrote to Xi Jinping, then Secretary of the CPC Zhejiang Provincial Committee, on 9 June. On 19 July of the same year,

19th of July that year, he replied to my letter.

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During his tenure as Secretary of the Fuzhou Municipal Party Committee, he also wrote to me, extending an invitation to visit Fuzhou. However, at that time I was working at Yan'an Literature magazine and was extremely busy every day, so I was unable to go, which I deeply regret. Subsequently, I also mailed him two books I had written: Conversations with Literary Friends on Creative Writing and the poetry collection My Northern Shaanxi.

Interview Team: During the Two Sessions in March 2015, when discussing the nationwide popularity of the television series Ordinary World with Shanghai delegate Cao Kefan, Xi Jinping remarked: "I was quite familiar with Lu Yao. We once lived in the same cave dwelling. When Lu Yao and Gu Xi were editing Mountain Flowers, he only wrote poetry, not fiction." Could you elaborate on his interactions with Lu Yao back then and specify which cave dwelling they shared?

Cao Guxi: In 1969, Lu Yao was relieved of his post as deputy director of the Revolutionary Committee due to issues arising from the Cultural Revolution. Like Gao Jialin in Life, he returned to Guojiagou in Liujiaogao Production Brigade.

Guojiagou, where Lu Yao resided, and Liangjiahe, where Xi Jinping was sent during the Cultural Revolution, are both small mountain villages in Wen'anyi Valley, separated merely by a ridge.

To discuss Xi Jinping and Lu Yao, one must first mention another figure: Tao Haisu, a Beijing-born educated youth who had been sent to Duanjiageda Brigade in Fengjiaping Commune. Originally a top student at Tsinghua High School, he was recruited in 1971 to work at the County Communist Youth League Committee (then the Youth and Women's Group of the County Revolutionary Committee). He and Xi Jinping were frequent companions. Whenever Xi Jinping travelled into town on business, he invariably stayed with Tao Haisu. By that time, I had recruited Lu Yao as a participant in the "**Rural Correspondents' Training Programme**," where he undertook full-time study, co-authored dispatches with me, and helped publish Mountain Flowers.

It must be said that Tao Haisu was a key contributor to Mountain Flowers at that time. His politically lyric poems published in the journal, such as Whenever I Open The Communist Manifesto, Life Goes On, Struggle Continues,

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and "National Day Reflections," published in Mountain Flowers, surpassed both mine and Lu Yao's in both ideological depth and artistic merit. I believe that in that unique era, the Mountain Flowers literary journal built bridges of friendship for Xi Jinping, Lu Yao, Tao

Haishu!

During that era, Xi Jinping frequently interacted with Lu Yao and Tao Haisu, all of whom were avid readers, thoughtful individuals, and young men with lofty ambitions. A native son, Lu Yao yearned to venture into a wider world to realise his dream of achieving great things. He was almost possessed by the desire to fuse and clash the cultures of the capital with those of his homeland within his own mind. Consequently, whenever Xi Jinping arrived, Lu Yao would always seek him out for conversation, sometimes talking through the night.

Xi Jinping and Lu Yao conversed on a wide range of topics—discussing rural life, urban development, society, and current affairs... Their conversation spanned ancient and modern times, East and West, astronomy and geography. Lu Yao marvelled: "He is four years younger than me, yet his knowledge is far broader and his aspirations far loftier."

Xi Jinping remarked that the crystallised wisdom of our forebears, the collective insights and successful experiences of countless individuals, are preserved in books. There is no need to seek permission to draw upon them for one's own benefit – why not do so? Only the foolish refrain from reading.

Perhaps influenced by Xi Jinping's words, Lu Yao solemnly addressed his fellow alumni at Yan'an University's 50th anniversary celebration in September 1988: "I implore you, dear classmates, never regard books as your '**enemy**'!"

During the Two Sessions, General Secretary Xi Jinping mentioned that he and Lu Yao were quite familiar with each other, having once shared a cave dwelling. Subsequently, several media reporters asked me: which cave dwelling had they occupied?

I explained that housing was extremely scarce for the Yanchuan County Revolutionary Committee back then, with all cadres combining living quarters with offices. Lu Yao and I shared a cave dwelling for work. At that time, whenever anyone had visitors, they could stay in whichever comrade's cave had space available. Xi Jinping was then a sent-down educated youth; it was only after

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later becoming the village Party secretary. He would visit the county town several times a year on official business, but the county authorities did not arrange a fixed cave dwelling for him.

I believe it is now of little consequence to verify which cave dwelling Xi Jinping and Lu Yao shared. What matters is why he chose to discuss this topic with Shanghai delegate Cao Kefan? What message does this conversation convey to us?

I believe Xi Jinping has creatively inherited and developed the spirit of Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art". His remarks underscore the Central Committee's emphasis on and warm concern for literary and artistic endeavours. They encourage our cultural workers to follow Liu Qing's example by immersing themselves in life over the long term, sharing the breath and destiny of the masses, and composing our era's "History of Entrepreneurship"; it encourages our literary and artistic workers to follow Lu Yao's example in Ordinary World, dedicating their youth and lives to fulfil the sacred mission history has entrusted to them, "to labour like oxen and till the soil". It encourages our literary and artistic workers to follow the example of Mountain Flowers, rooted in the masses, to create outstanding works that are deeply loved by the people and that promote virtue and aspiration.

Interview Team: Are there any lesser-known stories you can share about Xi Jinping's time as a sent-down youth in Yan'an?

Cao Guxi: During his seven years in Yancun, Xi Jinping not only made many friends at the brigade and commune levels but also cultivated numerous connections at the county and prefectural committee levels. Comrade Gao Mingchi, Deputy Director of the Yan'an Region's Office for Educated Youth, was one such figure. From welcoming educated youth to Beijing to settling them in Yan'an, Gao undertook extensive and intricate tasks. Through repeated interactions, he forged a deep friendship with Xi Jinping. In October 1975, before entering university, Xi Jinping made a special visit to Gao Mingchi's home in Yan'an to bid farewell.

fully aware of the family's severe financial hardship, he insisted on presenting Gao Mingchi with fifty jin of nationally valid grain coupons before departing.

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. In those trying times, 50 jin of grain coupons were an invaluable asset! Deeply moved by this gesture, Gao Mingchi made a special trip to Beijing to visit Xi Jinping after he had started university.

On 24 August 2007

, he wrote to Xi Jinping, reporting on his family circumstances and the changes in Yan'an. In just 11 days, he received Xi Jinping's warm and enthusiastic reply dated 4 September.

Comrade Gao Mingchi:

Greetings! I was delighted to receive your letter, which stirred memories of Yan'an.

Though I left Yan'an over thirty years ago, I have never forgotten it, nor the people who cared for and supported me during those years. I am profoundly grateful for your selfless assistance back then.

Learning that Yan'an has transformed—its hills now verdant, its waters clear, its transport network developed, and the people's lives improved—fills me with great joy. This is the shared aspiration of us all. I am confident that Yan'an's future will unfold as you envisionedA more splendid new Yan'an shall rise upon the loess plateau of northern Shaanxi."

Wishing you good health and happiness in all things!
autumnal wellbeing!

Xi Jinping

4 September 2007

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Interviewee: Liang Yuming (nickname: Wang Shuan) born February 1942, native of Liangjiahe Village, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province. Joined the Communist Party in 1965. Party of Liangjiahe Village from 1968 to 1974. Served as Director of Liangjiahe Village Committee from January 1974 to January 1975.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 27 December 2016

Location of Interview: Liang Yuming's residence, Liangjiahe Village, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province

Interview Team: Good day! When Xi Jinping was sent to Liangjiahe as a rural worker, you were the village Party branch secretary. After his arrival, you spent day and night with him, interacting extensively in both production and daily life, forging a deep friendship. Could you elaborate on Xi Jinping's circumstances during his time as a rural worker?

Liang Yuming: When Xi Jinping and the others came to the countryside, I was the Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe Village. At that time, grain production was the top priority in rural areas. The village Party branch secretary was also the brigade leader, whose main task was to lead the members in working hard and intensively to produce more grain. All work centred on grain production.

Xi Jinping and the other Beijing educated youths arrived at our Wen'anyi on 17 January 1969. That day, our village dispatched two production team members, accompanied by a donkey, to Wen'anyi to escort them back.

The educated youths all brought considerable luggage, large and small bundles mostly filled with clothes and bedding. Though bulky in appearance, they were not particularly heavy. Xi Jinping had two trunks, neither especially large. One villager, seeing his trunks were small, assumed they must be light. He went over to lift one, only to find it dead weight. The villager exclaimed, "Bingo, this trunk doesn't look big, yet it's so heavy! Is it packed with gold ingots?"

At that time, our Liangjiahe Brigade comprised two small teams: the Front Team and the Rear Team, also known as Team One and Team Two. Upon their return, we distributed these fifteen Beijing educated youths between the two teams. Team One housed nine youths—five males and four females—with two cave dwellings serving as the boys' dormitory and the girls' dormitory respectively. Team Two housed six youths, including Xi Jinping, all crammed into a single cave dwelling, sleeping on one heated bed.

These lads from Beijing had never even seen a mountain-valley stove, let alone knew how to cook with firewood. Our brigade assigned a member to prepare meals for them. After two months, they learnt to cook and thereafter did their own cooking.

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak,
act and take responsibility

After spending time together, our villagers grew familiar with these Beijing educated youths. It was only then that we learned those two heavy trunks Xi Jinping carried were filled entirely with books. It struck me then: Xi Jinping was just a fifteen-year-old lad, tall but rather thin. Those two enormous boxes of books felt unbearably heavy even to us, who were used to manual labour. That he'd lug them all the way from Beijing to this remote mountain hollow was truly remarkable. From that moment, I began to take notice of this youngest, bookish youth among the educated youths.

Interview Team: Did the educated youth encounter any difficulties in daily life when they first arrived in the village?

Liang Yuming: The first hurdle they faced was the language barrier. Our Shaanbei dialect is quite thick, and when the educated youths first arrived, their speech was incomprehensible to the farmers. At first, whenever an educated youth spoke, the farmers couldn't understand and would say, "I'm afraid." The educated youth were baffled: "Why are you afraid?" In truth, the villagers were using the local Yanchuan dialect "Hài bù hā" means "I don't understand," but the educated youth couldn't quite make it out and misheard it as "afraid." The educated youths asked me "Why do the locals get scared whenever we speak?" I explained that they weren't afraid; they were saying "Hǎi bù hā," meaning "I don't understand." I told them they needed to learn the common folk's language, master the Shaanbei dialect, to facilitate communication! Gradually, the educated youths began adopting our local dialect, and language barriers in their interactions with commune members faded away.

Interview Team: How did you become acquainted with the educated youths?

Liang Yuming: Back then, we commune members often studied alongside the educated youth. I recall we frequently studied Chairman Mao's writings, such as "Serving the People," "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," and "In Memory of Norman Bethune."

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak, act and take responsibility

As the village Party branch secretary, I organised classes for them, but in truth, I was learning alongside them too.

What left a deep impression on me was the essay "Serving the People." In it, Chairman Mao wrote – "As long as we persist in what is good for the people's interests and correct what is wrong for the people's interests, our ranks will surely flourish." The core idea here is that the standard for judging right and wrong should be based on the people's interests. We must persist in what is good and beneficial to the people, while rectifying what is wrong and detrimental to them. This piece isn't particularly lengthy (Shaanxi dialect: meaning not very long) yet I observed Xi Jinping poring over it repeatedly, reading it over and over, unable to put it down. I remember thinking to myself: "How can this lad be so devoted to learning?"

During his time in Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping also read extensively. He devoured books on politics, economics, philosophy, and literature – truly an immense amount! Whenever he had a moment to spare, he would sit down to read, sometimes continuing until late into the night. Back then, in our cave dwellings on the Loess Plateau, Xi Jinping often went hungry and poorly clothed. He laboured in the fields daily, squeezing out precious moments for study only at night by the dim light of a kerosene lamp. Yet even in such harsh conditions, his passion for learning burned fiercely. We used to say that while the commune members had a "smoking addiction," Xi Jinping had a **"book addiction."**

Today we often tell our children: "Study hard so you can get into a good university." It was virtually impassable for Xi Jinping back then. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was suffering severe political persecution, and Xi Jinping himself was labelled a "child of a counter-revolutionary gang". Even if he studied diligently, he had little chance of attending university. In truth, Xi Jinping's reading had no obvious utilitarian purpose; it wasn't for university entrance exams, but stemmed from a thirst for knowledge. During his seven years in Liangjiahe, I never saw him put down his books or abandon reading. Especially after becoming our village's

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak,
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village Party secretary, he not only worked alongside the villagers each day but also managed the village's affairs, both large and small. Despite such a demanding schedule, he persisted in his reading. When villagers visited his cave dwelling, they would remark "Look at the books piled high on the kang!" Had it not been for a genuine love of knowledge, how could he have persevered with reading under such arduous conditions? How could he have maintained this practice for seven years?

Interview Team: Besides labour and study, did Xi Jinping also participate in village affairs

at that time? Liang Yuming: Within a year or two, Jinping had become one of our own in Liangjiahe.

He possessed

and was methodical in his approach. His reasoning was sound, and the villagers held him in high regard and trusted him. Consequently, he began to take part in the various tasks of the village leadership team.

At the time, our village had a good-for-nothing fellow in his fifties who shirked his responsibilities and dabbled in petty theft. I admonished him: "If you don't mend your ways, you're no good as a commune member!" Yet this fellow remained incorrigible. Once, caught stealing the brigade's spring onions, he was branded a "**persona non grata**". Back then, such individuals faced harsh treatment: confinement, a commune assembly where they'd be made to wear a hat of shame, and a round of public criticism. In our village, criticism meetings essentially meant taking turns to berate someone, lambasting them mercilessly. At these sessions, Xi Jinping and Lei Pingsheng participated, yet they never uttered a single insulting word to this "good-for-nothing." Instead, they calmly reasoned with him, offering guidance and education. When members took turns berating the "good-for-nothing," he kept his head bowed, not uttering a word. Xi Jinping did not join in the abuse but instead reasoned with him point by point, instructing him to correct his errors. The "good-for-nothing" nodded in agreement throughout. At such meetings, the subject of criticism had no right to speak. Seeing him nod, Xi Jinping and Lei Pingsheng said, "Then sing a folk song!" **The ne'er-do-well** then cheerfully sang a song, his voice rising high and clear. After the criticism session, he declared: "From now on, **习主席** learn from the Beijing lads and dare not steal again."

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak, act and take responsibility

Han will learn from the lad from Beijing and dare not steal again." After witnessing this, the villagers all gave him the thumbs up, saying: "The lad from Beijing is the real deal!"

Later, when I mentioned this to Xi Jinping, he remarked: "He merely had some shortcomings, entirely rectifiable. He was still someone we could unite with. We should focus on education." Sure enough, after several talks with Xi Jinping, this incorrigible "good-for-nothing" soon changed his ways. From then on, he never stole chickens or dogs again, nor did he shirk his duties. Instead, he began working diligently, becoming a fine member of our commune and a good friend to Xi Jinping.

This incident left me deeply impressed by Xi Jinping's understanding that, at its core, persuasive work is fundamentally about working with people. Consider this: this "good-for-nothing" was already over fifty years old, persistently incorrigible, and had committed repeated errors, making him detested by the villagers. Yet Xi Jinping's approach to his work was fundamentally fair and egalitarian. He did not act out of subjective emotion or prejudice, but rather accorded others the necessary respect, ensuring that ideological education penetrated to the heart of the matter. Xi Jinping respected people, united them, and possessed excellent working methods – truly remarkable.

Even with some villagers who were crafty or prone to trouble, Xi could help resolve their issues through ideological work. Once, two women in the village had a falling out. After the quarrel, they began an endless cycle of verbal abuse. They would hurl insults whenever they met, even shouting across ditches or roads. The language was so vile it was beyond description. Their quarrel escalated to the point where they came to me. I suggested, "Why not let Xi Jinping mediate?" After he arrived, he spoke with each woman separately, and I don't know how many times they met afterwards. In the end, the two women reconciled and even became good friends. I realised then that Xi Jinping truly excelled at this kind of work. Village affairs were particularly numerous, and when I couldn't manage everything, I'd ask Xi Jinping to assist. He always handled matters steadily and competently, and the members were very satisfied.

Interview Team: Xi Jinping joined both the Communist Youth League and the Communist Party while in Liangjiahe. Do you know the specifics? Liang Yuming: In 1972, Jinping sought to advance his

political standing by joining the League. Yet his application proved a protracted and arduous process. He submitted several applications to the Youth League Secretary of the commune before finally being formally admitted that autumn.

By 1973, when our county recruited young rural activists, Xi Jinping was transferred to Zhaojiahe Village in Jiajiaping Commune to lead the socialist education campaign. There, he conducted the campaign with remarkable success, successfully guided villagers in constructing embankments, and cultivated excellent relations with the local community. Seeing Xi Jinping's competence and his strong rapport with the masses, the people of Zhaojiahe sought to retain him and prevent his return to Liangjiahe. Liangjiahe objected, insisting he come back—Xi Jinping was their man; how could he become theirs after merely a few months' service? When asked for his opinion, Xi Jinping replied: "I shall return. I came from Liangjiahe, and I shall return to Liangjiahe." And so, in July 1973, Xi returned to Liangjiahe.

Upon returning to Liangjiahe, the village wished for Xi Jinping to oversee its affairs. However, as he was not yet a Party member, applying for membership became an urgent priority. Xi Jinping thus drafted his application for Party membership, with Liang Youhua and myself serving as his sponsors. I subsequently organised a Party members' meeting. At the meeting, all members agreed to Xi Jinping's admission. Subsequently, I convened a branch meeting which also approved his membership. After the branch's endorsement, I submitted the materials to the commune. However, the commune secretary at the time refused to approve it. He even criticised me, saying "You, Liang Yuming, are quite bold! How dare you recommend the offspring of counter-revolutionary elements for Party membership!" I countered: "Whether Xi Jinping is a gangster's offspring remains inconclusive. Moreover, when assessing young applicants, one key criterion is their personal political conduct. If their political conduct is sound, they should be admitted." The secretary retorted: "Where did you find that stipulation?" I replied: "It's in the official circular issued by the Central Committee."

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak, act and take responsibility

Although I silenced the secretary, my defiance displeased him greatly, so he did not approve the application that time.

Upon returning, I relayed this to Xi Jinping, who seemed unsurprised. He sighed "I knew the commune wouldn't approve." I replied "It's not your fault. The commune's refusal is unjustified—they have no grounds to deny it."

Thus, Xi Jinping submitted numerous applications for Party membership over time, all rejected due to family circumstances—a situation utterly untenable. Later, when Bai Guangxing became the new commune secretary, he recognised Xi Jinping's capabilities. The commune Party committee concluded that Comrade Xi Zhongxun's circumstances should not bar Xi Jinping's admission, and referred his case to the county Party committee for review. The county Party secretary at the time also attached great importance to this matter. After deliberation by the county Party committee, Xi Jinping's admission was approved in January 1974. His admission coincided with the village leadership transition. Our village convened a Party members' meeting and elected Xi Jinping as Secretary of the Liangjiahe Brigade Party Branch. I, meanwhile, was appointed Director of the Brigade Revolutionary Committee.

Interview Team: Why did everyone elect Xi Jinping as village Party secretary, given his youth and status as an outsider, an educated youth?

Liang Yuming: Because Xi Jinping was young, fair-minded, resourceful, and hardworking. Even before joining the Party, he had already been involved in many village affairs. Everyone believed he would certainly do a good job managing our village.

Subsequent events proved this faith well-placed. As secretary, Xi handled matters impartially, worked diligently, and delivered tangible benefits to the village, earning the people's deep satisfaction.

Xi Jinping dared to speak his mind, dared to act, and dared to take responsibility. He had one defining characteristic: if what I say is wrong,

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If I'm wrong, point it out and I'll certainly rectify it; if I'm right, follow through without compromise. If you're in the wrong, I'll correct you – and not just once, but I'll see it through until you genuinely change. If anyone tries to pass off a deer as a horse, twisting black into white and insisting wrong is right, that's absolutely unacceptable." Xi Jinping is precisely such a man. He holds himself to the highest standards in his work before demanding the same of others. He excels at uniting his comrades and cares deeply for the people.

Xi Jinping handles affairs with great fairness. Many rural leaders engage in severe nepotism, favouring relatives and friends by granting them preferential treatment, allowing them to take more, consume more, and occupy more. Xi Jinping did not do this. Whether they were educated youth or commune members, he treated everyone equally. He absolutely refused to use public resources to give extra favours to friends and never did anything unfair. Therefore, when Xi Jinping criticised some commune members, they could accept it. The commune members respected him, believing him to be fair and without personal bias.

Interview Team: What did Xi Jinping accomplish in Liangjiahe after becoming village Party secretary?

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping accomplished much for our village. Allow me to recount the most memorable instances.

First, Xi Jinping read in the newspaper about biogas projects in Mianyang, Sichuan. He felt we could adopt this approach to solve the long-standing problem of burning firewood in rural areas. He discussed this with everyone, explaining several major benefits of biogas: firstly, it could solve the villagers' lighting needs; secondly, it could be used for cooking; thirdly, the waste from the biogas tanks could be used as fertiliser for crops. Subsequently, Xi Jinping and his team travelled to Sichuan to study biogas technology. After over a fortnight of training, they returned and convened a meeting to mobilise members, forming a construction team for the biogas project. Xi Jinping acquired considerable technical expertise in Sichuan and even brought back a technician. Under their joint guidance, we constructed the biogas digester. I participated in the construction alongside others, overseeing the quarrying of stones and the laying of slabs. These slabs were fitted together

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak, act and take responsibility

to form the basic structure of the digester. Once completed, it resolved our fuel shortage. The biogas could light lamps and cook meals, delighting all members. Previously, cooking required gathering firewood, which meant extra labour for the villagers. With biogas, the arduous task of chopping wood was eliminated. Everyone was overjoyed, declaring: "This biogas has finally solved the age-old problem of burning firewood that has plagued our ancestors for generations!" Later, the provincial authorities held a biogas demonstration meeting in our Liangjiahe village to promote the technology across the province. Soon, biogas became widespread throughout Shaanxi, bringing tangible benefits and convenience to farmers in many areas. This was a major undertaking by Xi Jinping.

The second matter was when Xi Jinping led us villagers in digging a well, resolving our entire village's drinking water issue. Previously, water was scarce in our village. We'd dig seepage pits in the river, scoop water with dippers into buckets, and carry it back for drinking. That water was murky, nowhere near as palatable as well water, and far from hygienic. In those days, Xi Jinping led us in digging the well without any of today's machinery – it was all done by hand. The diggers below used pickaxes to remove soil and rocks, loading them into baskets. A pulley was installed at the wellhead to hoist the baskets up. Manual well-digging carried significant risks. When hauling out soil and rocks, the slightest misstep could send a small stone tumbling down, posing a mortal danger to those below. It was winter then. Only after digging deep did we finally strike water – ice-cold and bone-chilling. Xi Jinping descended into the well, his legs submerged in muddy water, digging away at the soil and stones below. He worked for long stretches before finally being relieved when he could go no further. During this well-digging, Xi Jinping's legs suffered frostbite, leaving him prone to winter leg pains. The well took about half a month to complete, reaching over thirty metres deep. Our village still draws water from it today.

The third initiative was establishing an ironworks cooperative for the village. This facility manufactured and repaired tools: scythes for cutting grass, spades for digging earth, hoes for tilling fields, and axes for chopping firewood. It met the labour tool requirements of the cooperative members. The ironworks produced a surplus of tools, which were sold to

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak,

act and take responsibility

county supply and marketing cooperative, generating additional income for the village.

Xi Jinping also led us in constructing embankments. Relying solely on manual labour for dam construction proved inefficient. In the absence of diesel engines, we secured a loan to purchase one. This enabled hydraulic damming: connecting pipes to a four-metre-long dam-building machine, which was hauled up the hillside to loosen the soil. The diesel engine then drove water through the pipes, flushing the loosened earth down the slope to form level land—a technique known as “water—water damming”. These embankments proved exceptionally sturdy. ~~Xi Jinping's~~ we constructed five large tracts of such terraced land, adding dozens of acres of arable land to the village.

Moreover, upon returning from Sichuan, Xi Jinping introduced successful tobacco cultivation techniques to our village. He established a retail agency to facilitate villagers' access to daily necessities and founded a sewing cooperative to liberate women from manual labour. In less than two years as Party Secretary, Xi Jinping introduced biogas systems, dug wells, established an ironworks cooperative, cultivated tobacco, set up a retail agency, managed river and bridge maintenance, and constructed five large dam terraces. These initiatives brought profound changes to our village, and to this day, our villagers continue to benefit.

Interview Team: Could you recount Xi Jinping's departure from Liangjiahe to attend university?

Liang Yuming: In 1975, the county allocated one place at Tsinghua University. Our Yanchuan County Party Committee meeting recommended Xi Jinping for further studies. On the day he departed, without any formal arrangements, men, women and children from our village gathered early at the entrance to his cave dwelling to see him off.

Before Xi Jinping had even risen, the doorway was already crowded with people. When he finally got up and pushed open the cave dwelling door, he was startled at first to see everyone had come to see him off, then deeply moved. “I hadn't expected you all to come so early to see me off!” he exclaimed. The villagers replied “~~Xi~~ you're a fine lad from Liangjiahe. You're off to Beijing, so far away—of course we must see you off!” As they spoke, several women began to weep. Suddenly, someone in the crowd cried out, “Oh dear! Why on earth have you come?”

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak, act and take responsibility

here?" It turned out to be Shi Yubing, a disabled villager who rarely ventured out. Using crutches, he had laboured step by step to bid Xi farewell. Xi hurried over, took his hand, and immediately began to weep. Having worked side by side with Xi Jinping for years, through blood, sweat and tears, no matter how gruelling the task or daunting the challenge, I had never once seen him shed a tear. This was the only time I witnessed him cry.

The villagers accompanied Jinping a considerable distance. He repeatedly urged them to return, and only then did they reluctantly bid him farewell. We all recall Jinping telling the villagers "Everyone go back now. I shall return to see you all." ▲

Finally, I walked alongside more than ten fellow villagers, chatting all the way, until we saw him off at the county town. At that time, there was a man from our village named Lü Nengsheng who worked in the county town. The dozen or so of us stayed at his place all night. That night, none of us slept a wink. We just chatted, talked about family matters, and Xi Jinping instructed us on how to carry out the village work in the future and how to make arrangements. He told us to focus on large-scale agricultural infrastructure development. He said that with more flat land, incomes would rise, and problems like flash floods and food shortages could be resolved, ensuring everyone had enough to eat and wear... He discussed every aspect in great detail, as if there were no corner he hadn't thought through.

The next morning, we all agreed to commemorate the occasion. Pooling our savings—three maos here, five maos there—we gathered five yuan and fifty maos to have a photograph taken at the studio.

Still reluctant to see Xi Jinping depart, I accompanied him all the way from Yanchuan to Yan'an. Who could have imagined that the village Party secretary we saw off back then would one day become General Secretary of our Party?

Though Xi Jinping couldn't return often, he never forgot Liangjiahe. He frequently wrote letters inquiring about the village, expressing concern for its people, sharing updates about himself, and even sending photographs. We missed him dearly too. Young and old alike would often wonder aloud: When might Xi Jinping

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak, act and take responsibility

return to visit us in Liangjiahe?

In 1993, he finally returned. Those who heard the news rushed to greet him, embracing him warmly, shaking hands and chatting as if a long-lost relative had come home.

On 13th February 2015, Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe once more. It scarcely seems possible that time has passed so swiftly; in the blink of an eye, forty years have elapsed since we saw him off to university. Watching Xi Jinping visit each household to see how the villagers were faring, and observing the villagers gathering around him to chat, I recalled the scene forty years ago when he left Liangjiahe. Back then, everyone had gathered around him just like this, holding his hands. I thought to myself: Forty years have passed, and with this return, Xi Jinping has fulfilled his promise to revisit the elders and fellow villagers of Liangjiahe.

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping left Liangjiahe, what connections did he maintain with the village and with you personally?

Liang Yuming: When Xi Jinping was working in Xiamen, I took our commune secretary, Yang Shizhong, to visit him there. Old friends meeting again felt particularly warm and familiar, not at all awkward. But my visit that time wasn't for reminiscing; it was because our village still had no electricity supply. I wanted him to use his connections to see if the issue could be resolved. Xi Jinping said that being so far away, it might be difficult to sort out. I replied that if it proved too difficult, we wouldn't trouble him further and would revisit the matter later. Xi Jinping said, "You may return first. I shall consider how to proceed."

At the time, I assumed the matter was settled. Yet unexpectedly, Xi Jinping promptly contacted our county Party secretary, writing to him to relay our situation and urge its resolution. Subsequently, the county Party secretary allocated 200,000 yuan. Not only did Liangjiahe gain electricity, but all five villages in the valley were connected.

Liang Yuming: Xi Jinping dares to speak,
act and take responsibility

When Xi Jinping was working at the Fujian Provincial Party Committee, I sought him out again. This time it concerned establishing a school in our village. I explained our desire to build a school but lacked the funds. Subsequently, through his personal connections and extensive coordination, Xi Jinping engaged a charitable organisation. With their support, they funded the construction of a school for our village, featuring nine classrooms and accommodating over 100 pupils.

During my visit to Fujian, while chatting with Xi Jinping, I asked him about a high-ranking official in our country who had been sentenced to prison. What had happened? Xi Jinping replied "It was due to corruption" I said "Xi Jinping, you mustn't ever entertain such thoughts." Xi Jinping smiled and said, "Rest assured, I'm not that sort of person. I certainly am not that sort of person"

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Interviewee: Wu Hui (nickname: Tiesuo), born December 1954, villager of Liangjiahe. Became a village teacher in 1971, enrolled at Yan'an Teachers' College in 1973, and remained in education after graduation. Retired in 2015.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 28 December 2016

Location: Yanchuan County Guest House, Shaanxi Province

Wu Hui: Xi Jinping is both wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the people and highly adept at doing so.

Interview Team: Good day! During Xi Jinping's time as a sent-down youth in Liangjiahe, you interacted with him frequently and became quite acquainted. Could you elaborate on how you first came to know each other?

WuHui: When the Beijing educated youths first arrived at Wen'anyi Commune, the brigade sent some strong labourers to escort them to the village. I was not among them. At that time, I was only fourteen, having just returned from school. I was short and small, looking every bit a child, hardly qualifying as a strong labourer.

My family lived in the rear section of the village. The six educated youths, including Xi Jinping, were also assigned to the rear section. My home was less than twenty metres from their cave dwellings. As they carried their luggage into the caves, I stood at a distance watching them.

After the educated youths settled in, I would run over to their place whenever I had a moment. These Beijing educated youths were tall and slender, dressed far better than us poor mountain children. Though I'd attended junior high and had some education, I knew nothing of the outside world. Filled with curiosity about these young people from the "**big world**" of Beijing, I'd often cautiously hide ~~up~~ peering through **the door crack** ("sneak a peek" in Shaanxi dialect) their every move, and eavesdropping on their laughter and conversation. Yet I dared not enter, much less greet them.

Sometimes when the educated youths spotted me, they'd call out: "Come on in, little one! Come on in!" I still wouldn't go in. Truth be told, I wasn't a little kid at all. The youngest among them was Xi Jinping, and I was only a year younger than him. But because I was small and slight, they treated me like a child. Back then, I did feel a bit inferior around them. A country boy who'd seen nothing of the world, I didn't know what to say to them and dared not strike up a conversation. Still, I wanted to be with them because I had nowhere else to play and disliked doing chores at home.

When the Beijing educated youth first arrived, it was the dead of winter. They lived in freezing cave dwellings

Wu Hui: Xi Jinping is both wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the people and highly adept at doing so.

and didn't know how to stoke the kang. We village children all knew how to do it, so the educated youths asked me to help them with the fire. That's how I got into their cave dwellings and gradually got to know them. As a junior high school student, I was considered highly educated in the village at the time. Since I'd learnt Mandarin at school, though with an accent, the educated youth could understand me. We could communicate, so when other commune members came to the cave dwellings to speak with the educated youth, I could act as an interpreter between them.

At first, I couldn't tell the educated youths apart by name. But as I spent more time with them and heard them call each other by name, I gradually got to know them all. They also learned my nickname: "Tiesuo".

Interview Team: What aspects of daily life did the Beijing educated youth find particularly challenging when they arrived in the harsh conditions of northern Shaanxi?

Wu Hui: The educated youths endured a very arduous existence, finding it exceedingly difficult to adapt. Every aspect of daily life—from eating and sleeping to using the toilet and bathing—presented challenges they struggled to overcome. Several young men shared a single heated bed, which was rather small; six of them could just about squeeze onto it. Their luggage was stored beside the stove, making the space cramped and confined.

The educated youths had never used a wood-fired stove or cooked before. Initially, the commune assigned someone to prepare meals for them. After a while, however, they were expected to learn to cook for themselves, and the commune stopped providing meals. They had to chop their own firewood, tend their own fires, cook their own meals, and still participate in the commune's labour duties.

Gathering firewood proved a considerable challenge for the educated youths. In our county alone, there were educated youths who suffered falls while chopping wood in the mountains. The loess hills of northern Shaanxi were already sparsely vegetated. Year after year, we farmers had cleared all the easily accessible firewood from nearby areas. The better quality wood grew in distant, hazardous locations—some clinging to cliff faces, others deep in ravines where

Wu Hui: Xi Jinping is both wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the people and highly adept at doing so.

even sheep wouldn't graze. We children raised in these mountains dared to venture there. We'd climb the heights, chop the wood, and leap back down. The educated youths wouldn't dare. Our village lads would head up the hills with ropes and pickaxes and return carrying fifty or sixty jin. The youths could manage only ten jin or so, mostly thin shrubs or thatch grass. It wouldn't burn long in the stove; the fire would die before the rice was cooked. Later, I took them into the hills to chop wood, guiding them to the thickets where the fuel was plentiful. Chopping wood, lighting fires, cooking meals – these became daily necessities, or else hunger would strike. Such were the stark realities facing the educated youth.

When the educated youths first arrived, the most amusing sight was their water-carrying. Each load weighed over fifty or sixty jin, yet they knew neither how to use a pole nor switch shoulders. Being tall, they hunched back their way, bent over, panting and gasping as they hurried back to the cave dwellings. If they walked too briskly, the buckets would sway violently, spilling water everywhere. By the time they reached the cavedwellings, only half the water remained. Witnessing this, the communememberswouldlaughatthem.

Interview Team: Beyond the various hardships of daily life, the educated youth also had to participate in labour every day. Could you tell us how Xi Jinping engaged in this arduous work and gradually adapted to rural life?

Wu Hui: In the rural environment of that era, the educated youth, including Xi Jinping, inevitably experienced fluctuations in their mindset. Winters in northern Shaanxi were bitterly cold, with no electricity. Farmers' days consisted of labouring in the fields from sunrise until sunset, working ceaselessly yet achieving little in terms of productivity. Despite toiling year-round, a single mu of land yielded scant grain. Development in the region was also highly uneven. Throughout Yan'an, there were virtually no supplementary livelihoods; everything depended on farming. Most peasants lived below the poverty line. While some families managed to feed themselves, many more, like ours with seven or eight children, struggled to put food on the table. We survived by eating wild vegetables from the hills.

Wu Hui: Xi Jinping is both wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the people and highly adept at doing so.

wild greens from the hillsides.

For us children raised in these mountains, life in this small village was familiar from childhood. We lived in cave dwellings, and stepping outside meant facing loess hills. Looking up, we could only see a sliver of blue sky between the mountains—this was our world, and we felt no sense of alienation. But Xi Jinping and his comrades came from Beijing to this remote, impoverished mountain hollow. To endure the harsh life of a northern Shaanxi farmer here, they had to confront and accept this reality, to make a life for themselves in this place.

In spring, Xi Jinping, like the rest of us commune members, carried baskets of sheep and cow dung up the mountains on his shoulder pole. The educated youths weren't used to climbing; when they went too high, sometimes they lost their balance and the dung spilled out of the baskets. After delivering the manure, it was time to plough, harrow, and sow the fields. Once the seedlings sprouted, the main tasks were weeding and applying top dressing. If the fields were not cultivated properly, there would be no harvest in autumn, no grain to eat, and hunger would follow. This was a stark reality.

Both commune members and educated youths worked the fields together. At first, they struggled to distinguish weeds from seedlings – something we local youngsters knew instinctively. After we showed them, they learned quickly. Despite their lack of farming experience, their education and strong comprehension meant they picked things up remarkably fast.

Weeding occurred in spring and summer, when the weather was scorching. The team leader demanded we work swiftly, forbidding rest breaks. When I wanted to slack off, I'd use the excuse of needing to relieve myself, slipping off to the ditch for three or four minutes, five or six minutes. If the team leader didn't call us back, I wouldn't return. I truly couldn't endure that hardship—hungry, thirsty, baked by the sun—and sometimes felt utterly unable to continue. But Xi Jinping persevered the whole time; I never once saw him slack off.

During harvest season, we went together to cut wheat. Our mountain fields lay five li away, and on the return journey, both commune members and educated youths carried a load each. We collectively fed cattle and donkeys, and tending these beasts required chopping fodder with a chopper. The educated youths didn't know how to chop grass,

Wu Hui: Xi Jinping is both wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the people and highly adept at doing so.

and it wasn't easy to master the scythe's technique. The blade would get stuck halfway through the cut. Later, we gradually got the hang of it and could slice through in one go.

Though I was a country lad, my youth, small stature, and lack of strength made this labour a considerable challenge. I started earning **six** points of work, gradually increasing my output, yet He never earned a **full ten** points. Xi Jinping was tall and strong, and grew increasingly adept at his work. ~~In my time~~ from 1969 to 1970, Xi Jinping remained a relatively steady, ordinary educated youth who initially struggled to adapt to the gruelling labour. Yet within a year or two, he transformed into an exceptional labourer, routinely earning **ten** points daily. Not only did he excel in physical work, but he also gradually integrated with the commune members in both ideology and language. Whenever a family faced hardship, he would assist to the best of his ability.

I frequented the educated youths' cave dwellings often, always dressed in rags. Noticing my tattered clothes, Xi Jinping would regularly give me his own garments. When Wang Yansheng left Liangjiahe, he left Xi Jinping a blue coat with a grey fur collar. It was a fine coat that Xi Jinping liked very much and wore often. That winter when I went to normal school was exceptionally cold, so Jinping gave me that coat. He said "Take this coat with you. At school, you can wear it and use it as a blanket." When I arrived at normal school, my classmates all marvelled "This coat is of such fine quality!" That coat accompanied me for many years, and I still wore it after I started working.

When I left for normal school, Xi Jinping also gave me thirty jin of grain coupons for my expenses away from home. In the sixties and seventies, thirty jin of grain coupons represented a month's rations for a strong labourer. In truth, Xi Jinping's own grain supply was barely sufficient at that time, so these coupons were precious to him too.

Interview Team: Could you tell us about Xi Jinping's reading and study habits during his time in Liangjiahe?

Wu Hui: Xi Jinping is both wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the people and highly adept at doing so.

Wu Hui: One reason I enjoyed visiting the educated youths' cave dwellings was the opportunity to browse the many books Xi Jinping had brought. Books were everywhere—along the edge of the heated bed, on the bedding, beside the pillows. Looking back, that cave dwelling felt particularly warm and magical, like a treasure trove of knowledge.

Sometimes when we went up the mountain to work, Xi Jinping would carry a book in his pocket. During breaks, while everyone else chatted, he would take out a book to read. Even when we returned to the cave dwellings at noon for a short rest, he would seize the opportunity to read for a while. I believe this stemmed partly from his deep interest in reading, but also because reading gave him boundless strength. Books contained a broader world and richer knowledge. Through learning, one broadened one's horizons, absorbed knowledge, and grew stronger and more resilient.

My family was very poor. From childhood, I never had a penny of pocket money, let alone money to buy books. So I greatly envied Xi Jinping for having so many books. When I was in their cave dwelling, I longed to see what those books contained. At first, I dared not flip through them much, only cautiously turning a couple of pages. Later, as I became more familiar, I would pick them up and browse. Seeing my interest, Ping said to me "Tiesuo, if there's any book you fancy, just take it." I nodded eagerly, my heart filled with joy.

The first book I read was *Ten Thousand Whys*, which held a special fascination for me. I thought: if I don't know the answer to a single why, imagine how remarkable it would be to learn ten thousand whys! The book contained vast knowledge of natural sciences, all of which deeply captivated me. Having grown up in a remote mountain valley, I knew nothing of the outside world. The furthest I'd ever ventured from home was Wen'anyi; I'd never even been to the county town. **Ten Thousand Whys** was an illustrated popular science book. Seeing aeroplanes, motorcars, and steamships in its pages filled me with immense delight.

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I also borrowed physics and chemistry textbooks from Ping. Moreover, he possessed numerous classical literary works and historical masterpieces. I read Records of the Three Kingdoms, though being written in classical Chinese, I encountered many unfamiliar characters. Whenever I came across something I didn't understand, I would ask him, and no matter what I inquired about, Ping patiently taught me. I also read Maxim Gorky's Mother and Mikhail Sholokhov's And Quiet Flows the Don. Jinping had brought these books from Beijing and lent them to me.

Before long, a year or two passed. Some educated youths returned to the cities, others found employment, and some enlisted in the military. Most departed. I would visit Xi Jinping in the evenings. He maintained his habit of reading whenever he had time, he would be engrossed in a book, reading late into the night before retiring.

Interview Team: Within a year or two, most of the Beijing educated youth in the village had departed. Xi Jinping remained in Liangjiahe the longest and became the village Party secretary. Could you explain why Xi Jinping was selected for this role?

Wu Hui Among our commune members, regardless of age or gender, the impression of Xi Jinping was that he was a man of few words. He didn't speak much, but when he did, he hit the nail on the head. Looking back now, it was no accident that Xi Jinping became the Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe. At the time, no one in the village found it surprising.

On the one hand, educated individuals were scarce in rural areas at that time. Xi Jinping possessed education, conducted himself with steadiness, and considered matters thoroughly—a rare talent in the countryside back then. Moreover, even before becoming Party Secretary, he had participated in the village's management work and maintained very harmonious relations with the villagers. Coupled with his experience leading the Socialist Education Movement in Zhaojiahe, he had gained considerable expertise in all aspects of rural production, daily life, and both major and minor affairs.

It can be said that the years 1972 to 1973 marked a turning point in Xi Jinping's life.

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Most educated youths had departed, but Xi Jinping remained unable to leave due to his father's political persecution. During this period, a marked shift occurred in his thinking. He gradually realised that the bright path he had so earnestly sought lay right beneath his feet! Though I returned to school in 1973, whenever I came back, I would visit Xi Jinping's cave dwelling for a chat. I recall Xi Jinping sharing his thoughts with me back then: "Why couldn't I put down roots in Liangjiahe? Why couldn't I stay here and do good for the common folk? One must follow one's own path and handle one's own affairs!" With this mindset and awareness, coupled with Xi Jinping's own reflection and diligence, he accomplished a great deal – all tangible, practical work. It can be said that Xi Jinping's worldview and values began to take shape during this period. His primary concern was no longer his own advancement, but how to serve the village effectively and improve the lives of its people.

Later, when recruitment quotas opened in the village, I observed that Xi Jinping did not apply. His focus was on leading the villagers out of hardship together, rather than leaving the countryside alone. Thus, after becoming Party Secretary, Xi Jinping accomplished a great deal of practical and beneficial work for the village. Many initiatives he spearheaded with the villagers continue to yield benefits even today, over forty years later. Without his conviction to root himself in the countryside and his aspiration to deliver tangible benefits for the people, it would have been impossible for him to achieve so much good or remain in the rural areas for so long. His subsequent decision to attend university was driven by a desire for further education to better serve the people.

Conversely, it was precisely Xi Jinping's lived experience in the countryside and his profound reflection on rural challenges that provided him with such clear direction and enabled him to execute his work with such solidity.

Interview Team: Could you elaborate on the specific practical measures Xi Jinping implemented to benefit the people?

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Wu Hui: In northern Shaanxi, fertile land was scarce, forcing farmers to cultivate grain on mountain slopes. This resulted in extensive cultivation with meagre returns – farmers expended considerable effort and endured great hardship, yet annual grain yields remained limited. Thus, constructing silt-trapping dams proved crucial. Positioned in mountain valleys, these dams retained water flowing down from the hills, naturally increasing grain yields. Xi Jinping therefore placed great emphasis on dam construction and fundamental agricultural infrastructure development at that time.

Xi Jinping resolved the long-standing fuel crisis plaguing rural northern Shaanxi. At that time, sparse vegetation made firewood collection extremely difficult in our northern Shaanxi villages, rendering cooking, heating and lighting major challenges. Consequently, Xi Jinping persistently sought solutions to this problem. When he first proposed developing biogas, many were sceptical and unsupportive. Xi Jinping travelled to Sichuan to study biogas technology. Upon his return, he personally conducted trials and successfully constructed and ignited Shaanxi Province's first biogas digester. Under these circumstances, no cooperative members opposed the biogas initiative. Frankly speaking, farmers are the most pragmatic people. They only accept something when they see it and reap tangible benefits. No amount of theoretical reasoning about prospects or future benefits would sway them. It required hands-on demonstration to show them the way. From then on, biogas gained widespread adoption, resolving the long-standing fuel shortage that had plagued our region for years.

The liquid from the biogas digester serves as fertiliser for farmland, far more potent than ordinary manure. Our village once conducted an experiment, applying this liquid to a designated plot. By harvest time, the crops grown with it were visibly more vigorous than those fertilised with manure, yielding a higher crop yield. After Xi Jinping became Party Secretary, he also established a sales agency in the village, primarily to facilitate the daily necessities of the commune members.

Members wishing to purchase daily necessities like kerosene, matches, or soap previously had to travel to the supply cooperative in Wen'anyi on market days. This required taking a day off work, making the journey there and back, wasting considerable time. With the agency point, the village stocks items farmers need. They can walk just a few minutes to the point and buy what they require. Over time, the system became increasingly flexible:

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Members could also buy on credit or barter with eggs. For instance, a pound of kerosene could be exchanged for four or five eggs.

The Ironworks Cooperative was another significant initiative by Xi Jinping. He organised skilled blacksmiths into a quota-based system: each smith producing three old hoes (a Shaanxi dialect term for hoe heads) daily earned ten labour points. Exceeding the quota brought bonuses, while falling short resulted in deductions. More labour yielded more rewards; less labour yielded less. At that time, most brigades in Yanchuan lacked sideline businesses, and without sideline businesses, there was no capital. Our Ironworks produced hoes, mattocks, and sickles. Any surplus beyond members' needs was sent to the Wen'anyi Supply and Marketing Cooperative for consignment sales. After deducting costs from the proceeds, the remaining money became the village's collective income. The village reaped tangible benefits and could also share profits with the blacksmiths. For instance, if a tool sold for three yuan, the blacksmith might receive a reward of ten or twenty fen. The entire planning, management, and distribution system of the Ironworks Cooperative was devised by Xi Jinping, representing a remarkably advanced management approach for the time. This single example demonstrates that Xi Jinping was not only wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the people but also adept at doing so, possessing a set of methods and skills.

Farm labour was intensely demanding, placing an especially heavy burden on women. Burdened with household chores, they not only had to work in the fields to earn labour points but also cooked meals, mended clothes, and looked after children at home. In those rural times, children were born one after another, each just a year or two apart. Come mealtime, they would sit in a row, all scrambling to eat, making childcare truly arduous. Come evening, after the men and children had retired, the women still could not sleep. They would take up their sewing and mend clothes by the dim light of an oil lamp.

On one occasion, Xi Jinping discussed the lives of farmers in northern Shaanxi with me, remarking: "Why is rural life so arduous? Why are women so overburdened? One reason is that families have too many children." I replied: "Indeed, we had seven siblings, and that wasn't considered excessive." Xi Jinping observed: "The more children born,

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heavy burdens on farmers and increased toil for women. Young people in the countryside should have fewer children and raise them well." It's clear that even then, Xi Jinping had ideas about eugenics and quality child-rearing to ease women's burdens.

Seeing how hard rural women toiled, Xi Jinping gave this matter serious thought. The sewing cooperative he established was primarily designed with women in mind. Peasants' clothes wore out quickly, and after finishing their day's labour, women would spend evenings mending and sewing by kerosene lamp light. Xi Jinping enlisted Lei Qin, a skilled seamstress from our rear brigade, to specialise in mending and tailoring within the cooperative. This allowed other women to labour in the fields during the day and avoid late nights sewing by kerosene lamp. He also established a system whereby members could pay for tailoring services using labour points. For instance, a member earning 10 points per day could use these points to have garments made: 5 points for a jacket, while a pair of trousers cost 2 points. The more garments the seamstress produced, the more labour points she earned. This approach liberated women's labour while meeting the villagers' daily needs.

Xi Jinping also had a deep well drilled for our village. Previously, the front brigade had no well, relying instead on brackish water from shallow wells – both inconvenient and of poor quality. Moreover, the brigade cultivated a vegetable plot that required substantial irrigation, making manual water-carrying excessively labour intensive. After consulting with the villagers, Xi Jinping decided to drill a well beside the vegetable plot. During the drilling he personally descended into the well, wading through icy water to dig out soil and stones. Once completed, this well simultaneously resolved the village's drinking water and vegetable irrigation needs. Even today, the village's tap water supply originates from this very well.

Xi Jinping also established a mill for the village. Why build a mill? At that time, donkeys were vital transport in northern Shaanxi. They were often used to haul goods or carry manure up mountains. Donkeys were scarce and frequently in short supply, leading to disputes among villagers over their use. Using donkeys to grind grain

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it would take from morning until afternoon to grind just twenty or thirty jin of grain. The mill Xi Jinping established was equipped with a set of machinery: a diesel engine, a flour mill, and a rice polisher. Dozens of jin of grain could be processed in a short while, eliminating wasted time. It handled all the village's flour milling and rice polishing needs, freeing up the donkeys for production and transport. Villagers simply brought their grain, and it was milled in no time – extremely convenient and entirely free of charge.

Xi Jinping's numerous practical achievements stemmed from his firsthand understanding of the challenges farmers faced, as well as his constant observation and reflection. He dared to experiment, was bold in his thinking and actions, and possessed both the capability and skill to turn ideas into reality.

Interview Team: What were Xi Jinping's distinctive characteristics as village Party secretary?

Wu Hui: Xi Jinping commanded respect and possessed capability, accomplishing numerous practical tasks while actively integrating with the members. Upon arriving in Liangjiahe, he diligently studied our local dialect. By his later years, particularly after becoming Party Secretary, he could converse fluently with everyone in the Yanchuan dialect. In daily life, he showed great respect for the elderly and genuine care for children. He was equally approachable with peers. Even when addressing less enthusiastic members or those deemed "troublemakers," he never resorted to shouting or scowling. He always spoke calmly and reasonably, earning genuine respect from everyone. In our rural circles, once relationships grew close, we'd often joke and tease each other, sometimes crossing boundaries – giving nicknames or poking fun. Though Xi Jinping got on well with everyone, he never gave anyone a nickname nor mocked others. Deep down, people felt both affection and respect for him.

In his work, he displayed determination and perseverance. He seldom spoke lightly, but once he committed to something, he saw it through to the end. In our rural parlance, he was unwavering in his convictions, precise in his actions, and never made empty promises. Whether building dams, establishing biogas plants, setting up agency sales

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and establishing an ironworks cooperative. Whatever he undertook, he saw through to completion. No task was ever abandoned midway. Whatever difficulties arose, he found ways to overcome them.

He also resolutely corrected errors among cadres. During his tenure as Party Secretary, a young tractor driver from the front brigade was elected production team leader. Yet this role demanded overseeing the entire brigade's production, requiring hardship and diligence—a stark contrast to the prestige and ease of tractor driving. The young man struggled mentally to adapt, clinging to his desire to continue driving. In those days, rural production offered little autonomy to individual members; success hinged entirely on the production team leader's example. Decisions on planting and harvesting timings required the leader to be both an agricultural expert and a hardworking, responsible individual. Thus, a competent leader meant better livelihoods for farmers, while an ineffective one left them hungry. Xi Jinping reasoned with him: "Since you've been elected production team leader, it shows the villagers trust you. You must work diligently and set an example. As the team's leader, everyone is watching you! Driving the tractor will affect your leadership and impact your team's harvest." At first, he still struggled to adjust. Xi Jinping encouraged him to reflect gradually, reporting his thoughts each morning to gauge his progress. After three or four consecutive mornings of this, he was moved by Xi Jinping's dedication to village affairs—especially as an outsider, an educated youth from another region. As a native villager, he felt he ought to work even harder for the production team. Gradually, his mindset shifted. He settled into his role as production team leader, focusing steadfastly on organising the team's work and leaving tractor driving to others. Later, this young man proved an excellent leader.

In rural areas, altercations were not uncommon. Sometimes, while labouring in the hills, two members would exchange harsh words over a minor disagreement, and before long, blows would be exchanged. In those days, teenagers and those in their twenties generally had some education, but older villagers were mostly illiterate, lacking cultural refinement.

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Keeping livestock proved unviable, and resolving disputes was often crude and brutal—verbal altercations and brawls were commonplace. Having witnessed such scenes repeatedly, Xi Jinping recognised rural violence as a grave issue. Upon becoming brigade secretary, he established village regulations prohibiting fighting and quarrelling. At meetings, he declared that villagers must refrain from physical or verbal confrontations, with penalties imposed for violations. Yet such incidents remained inevitable. In our rear brigade, two lads—nicknamed "Monkey" and "**Shorty**"—had long-standing ~~When a dispute flared, they came to blows, leaving both with black eyes and swollen faces. The production team leader, unable to resolve it, referred the matter to Xi Jinping. Though Xi knew their history, rules were rules: both were fined ten labour points. At the time, Jinping stated: " Regardless of who is in the right or wrong, you must not fight. Those in the right must not fight, and those in the wrong certainly must not fight."~~ When a dispute flared, they came to blows, leaving both with black eyes and swollen faces. The production team leader, unable to resolve it, referred the matter to Xi Jinping. Though Xi knew their history, rules were rules: both were fined ~~ten~~ labour points. At the time, Jinping stated: " Regardless of who is in the right or wrong, you must not fight. Those in the right must not fight, and those in the wrong certainly must not fight." Xi demanded they make a public self-criticism at the commune meeting. They felt this would be humiliating and were reluctant. Xi asked them: " Do you accept the punishment? The ban on fighting is our village rule. Everyone was present at the meeting and agreed to it. If you cannot accept the deduction of labour points, I will give you mine, but you must make the self-criticism." Hearing this, both men felt ashamed: " We were wrong to fight. We deserve the penalty points. It wouldn't be right for you to cover for us. There's no arguing with that. We accept the punishment!" During Xi Jinping's tenure as secretary, brawling incidents in Liangjiahe noticeably decreased. Years later, when "**Shorty**" recounted this story to me, he still marvelled: "Xi Jinping really knew how to handle ideological work!"

Rural conflicts are as numerous as cowhair, and the work of a village Party branch secretary is particularly arduous. One who excels as a commune secretary may not necessarily succeed as a brigade secretary. Village work demands considerable mental effort and consideration of many issues. Ideological work with farmers is no easy task; when you engage with them, you must ensure they can accept it intellectually. Once the ideological groundwork is solid, everything else falls into place. Farmers will respect you,

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and support your work. The authority of rural cadres isn't built overnight, nor is it achieved through empty rhetoric. Farmers are very practical; they judge you by your ability to get things done and your fairness. As long as you meet these two criteria, any problem can be resolved.

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping left Liangjiahe, what contact did you maintain with him?

Wu Hui: When Xi was working in Zhengding, I served as the education specialist for Wen'anyi Commune. Zhengding authorities dispatched two individuals to conduct an external review of Liangjiahe's Party branch. They first arrived at Wen'anyi Commune's office, where I happened to be present. Unaware of Liangjiahe's location, I, being a native, directed them there. Upon reaching the village, they questioned numerous residents, all of whom spoke of him in glowing terms without exception. After completing their investigation in the village, the two comrades returned to Wen'anyi Commune to sign off on their report. Once again, I happened to be present. As it was lunchtime, I asked if they had eaten. They replied they hadn't, so I took them to a restaurant for a meal of northern Shaanxi-style huo le noodles. During the meal, we struck up a conversation. As we chatted, I inquired about Xi Jinping's circumstances.

I asked "What exactly is Xi Jinping doing over there?"

One of them replied "He's the county Party secretary" I asked, "How is he doing?"

"He's doing splendidly and commands great respect among the people. At the annual Three-Level Cadres' Meeting (a mandatory gathering for brigade, commune, and county-level officials held yearly in the 1970s), many officials' speeches would become tedious halfway through. People would grow weary and leave, while others would nod off. But when Xi Jinping speaks, no one leaves and no one sleeps. His speeches are engaging, practical, and deeply compelling—the cadres all love listening to him."

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I remarked "When Xi served as village Party secretary, our villagers also enjoyed listening to his speeches. Another comrade confided to me" Xi's working style differed from other cadres

Many leading cadres have their schedules arranged by their offices with advance notice. When Xi Jinping oversaw county affairs and inspected townships and villages, he never gave prior warning. He would simply set off on his bicycle. Upon arrival, he would check whether the responsible officials were present and assess the actual progress of the work. He conducted these inspections on the spot, denying them any opportunity to prepare in advance. If he observed any shortcomings in the work, he would immediately summon the relevant officials to the site and urge them to formulate rectification plans. ^ ^

Hearing these two comrades speak, I was heartened to learn that Xi Jinping performed his duties well and had demonstrated his talents on a larger stage.

After Xi Jinping departed Liangjiahe, a villager named Zhang Zhilin approached me inquiring about his whereabouts, stating he wished to repay a debt. It transpired that when Xi Jinping departed Liangjiahe, the village had yet to conduct its year-end settlement. At year-end, when accounts were reconciled, households with many members but few labour points would pay grain fees (a Shaanxi dialect term for remitting money to the commune), while those with few members but many labour points would receive grain payments (a Shaanxi dialect term for receiving cash from the commune). Households paying grain fees would remit money to the accountant, who would then distribute it to households receiving grain payments. Xi Jinping had accumulated many labour points but received no grain allocation at year-end, thus qualifying for grain money. Zhang Zhilin's household, with many children and few labour points, required substantial grain allocations and consequently owed grain money. To balance the accounts, the accountant exchanged Jinping's annual grain payment of eighty yuan for Zhang Zhilin's household. Zhang Zhilin's family should have returned this eighty yuan directly to Jinping, but they were too impoverished to produce the sum. Moreover, Jinping had left the village to attend school. Thus, Zhang Zhilin's family never found an opportunity to repay Jinping, leaving them deeply troubled. Now that Zhang Zhilin had money, he was determined to repay Jinping. He often remarked, "That money Jinping gave us saved our entire family. Debts must be repaid; otherwise, one's conscience won't allow it."

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I advised Zhang Zhilin, “Even if you gave it back to him now, he wouldn't accept it. He's helped so many people – just look around our village, is there a single household he hasn't assisted? Rest assured, he certainly ~~wouldn't~~ ~~against you~~” Eighty yuan in the seventies was no small sum; in purchasing power terms, it would be roughly equivalent to eight thousand yuan today.

In 1993, Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe. The villagers welcomed him warmly, even slaughtering a sheep for the occasion. As we shared the meal, Xi Jinping gave numerous instructions, which I listened to attentively. He emphasised the need to manage the mountains, build dams in the rivers, plant economic forests and fruit trees on the hillsides, level the fields to boost yields, address food security, and tackle cultural issues... He spoke at length on all these matters. Throughout, his foremost concern remained the lives of ordinary people at the grassroots level.

It was during that visit that Xi Jinping inquired about a child named Lingwa. The story of this boy requires some background. In 1969, when the educated youth arrived in Liangjiahe, our village had a teenager nicknamed Lingwa. Though called by this name, he was not particularly bright; he had congenital intellectual disabilities, what we in the countryside termed "**a bit simple-minded.**" Lingwa's father ~~brigade~~, primarily responsible for leading the educated youths in tasks like dam-building and terraced field construction. He often brought Lingwa along to the fields. Though mentally challenged, Lingwa worked diligently and endured hardship. Xi Jinping and the other youths were fond of him, enjoying playtime with him after labour without ever scorn or ridicule. When Xi Jinping returned in 1993, Lingwa's father had already passed away. Lingwa's mother was raising him alone, and the family's circumstances were dire, their life extremely difficult. To help support them, Xi Jinping left Lingwa's mother 500 yuan.

On the eve of the 2015 Spring Festival, Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe to visit the villagers. He called in at every household, conversing with the locals in the Yanchuan dialect. It was as though he had returned to a long-lost home, and he was particularly

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Interviewees: Zhang Weipang, Lü Housheng, Liu Jinlian, villagers of Liangjiahe

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview dates: First session 27 February 2016, Second session 29 December 2016

Interview Locations: Reception Room of Liangjiahe Village Committee, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province; Liu Jinlian's residence

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

In January 1969, fifteen educated youths from Beijing arrived in Liangjiahe. Among them were Xi Jinping and five others, who were assigned to the Second Brigade. Initially, all six crammed into a single cave dwelling belonging to Zhang Qingyuan and Liu Jinlian

These six were initially all crammed into a single cave dwelling belonging to the couple Zhang Qingyuan and Liu Jinlian, sleeping on a single heated bed. Within a year, they relocated to a cave dwelling belonging to Lü Housheng. Later, they moved into newly excavated dwellings designated for the educated youth. Initially, the brigade assigned personnel to cook exclusively for the educated youth, with the kitchen established in Zhang Weipang's cave dwelling. By the time Xi departed Liangjiahe, he was the sole remaining Beijing educated youth, having shared meals at Zhang Weipang's home for nearly a year.

Through this series of interviews with Zhang Weipang and his two landlords, Lü Housheng and Liu Jinlian, we gain insight into how Xi Jinping integrated with the villagers of Liangjiahe and how he repaid even the smallest kindness with profound gratitude.

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

"No matter how coarse the fare, Xi Jinping ate with relish; no matter how impoverished the person, Xi Jinping held them in high regard - ♦♦

Zhang Weipang



Interview Team: Hello! When Xi Jinping arrived in Liangjiahe as an educated youth, you were in the same production brigade. You ate and worked together daily. Could you share your experiences interacting with Xi Jinping?

Zhang Weipang: Xi arrived in Liangjiahe over a month before I did. I originally hailed from Pangjiahe Village in Majiahe Township. In February 1969, I became a son-in-law in Liangjiahe and moved to the village, where I met Xi, who had already been there for over a month.

When I first arrived, Xi and the other five educated youths from Brigade Two were all living in one cave dwelling at Liu Jinlian's house. I was also in Brigade Two. Their cooking area was set up in one of the caves at my home, and the brigade assigned someone specifically to tend the fire and prepare their meals. Consequently, we ate together daily, worked together, and interacted quite frequently.

My father-in-law, Zhang Guilin, was a veteran Communist Party member and the long-serving Party secretary of Liangjiahe. He held that position from 1935 to 1960, having witnessed many events and commanding considerable respect in the village. Xi Jinping often visited our home to chat with my father-in-law.

Over time, as we interacted more frequently, we grew familiar with each other and our exchanges became increasingly frequent

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

and our relationship grew ever closer. Whenever I had free time, I'd pop round to Xi Jinping's cave dwelling for a natter. I particularly loved listening to Xi Jinping tell stories. Being a simple fellow myself, I understood little and hadn't read many books, so I'd just sit there wide-eyed, listening for ages. Back then, I thought his stories were utterly fascinating! I still remember him recounting tales from Dream of the Red Chamber and others. Sometimes, when we'd been talking for a long while and it was time for a meal, Xi Jinping would prepare the food (in Shaanxi dialect, "do the meal") and invite me to eat with him.

Interview Team: Did Xi Jinping ever stay overnight at your home?

Zhang Weipang: No. He lived in three different places during his time in Liangjiahé. The first was at Liu Jinlian's house, the second at Lü Housheng's house, and the third was the educated youth cave dwelling in the village. I helped him move caves twice. It was only when he moved that I realised just how many books he had!

When Xi Jinping served as our village Party secretary, all the educated youths had left except him. Juggling village affairs and brigade labour left him no time for cooking or washing up. He asked me, "How about I come to your house for meals?" I replied, "Certainly! As long as you don't mind our large household!" Of course I welcomed Xi Jinping's offer to dine at our home, though I did harbour some concern. At the time, there were six of us living there: an elderly relative, my wife and I, and three children. I worried the household might be too noisy and chaotic, fearing Xi Jinping might not enjoy his meals properly.

He handed over his entire monthly ration of 40 jin of grain to our household. When he ate with us, he simply joined in whatever my wife cooked. That was the sort of man he was—he could eat the most humble fare with relish and held the poorest people in the highest regard.

And so Xi Jinping ate at our table for nearly a year, until he left for university and departed

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

Liangjiahe.

Come to think of it, while he was staying with us, Xi Jinping even mediated a family dispute.

Once, my wife and I quarrelled over a trifling matter. I was in a foul mood, and she was equally stubborn. We argued fiercely, neither willing to concede or offer an olive branch, leaving the situation utterly irreconcilable. This left us at loggerheads for days.

Though we never quarrelled in front of Xi Jinping, he often dined at our home. Seeing us sulk and glare at each other without a word, he naturally picked up on the tension.

He asked me "Wei Pang, what's the matter between you and your wife?" I mumbled "Nothing much..."

Ping said "I shan't pry into specifics. Whoever's right is right, whoever's wrong is wrong. Stand your ground if you're in the right, and correct yourself if you're not. No need to stubbornly hold your ground—reason with each other when you should. Anyway, you've got your fair share of faults, Wei Pang. The ones you ought to fix, you must fix. Your wife, though, is a proper decent sort—neat, efficient, hardworking. She keeps the house spotless and looks after the family so well, saving you a lot of trouble. You shouldn't be arguing with her like this!"

I nodded and said "Xiping, you're right. I should make peace with her."

Pingjing said "Making peace is the way to go! Take the initiative to have a chat with her. There's nothing that can't be resolved."

In our countryside, it's not like the city. City folk are more civilised; when men 'fear' their wives, it's not fear at all—it's equality, it's respect. But the countryside is different, especially in the old days. Patriarchy ran rampant. Men wouldn't yield to their wives; they'd lord it over them, barking orders and even beating them—it was commonplace. I'd always assumed, as a grown man, that my wife would be the one to back down at home. But this time, since Xi Jinping had approached me,

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

me for a talk, I thought Rather than both of us remaining at loggerheads and waiting, I might as well swallow my pride and compromise with her first" So I seized an opportunity to speak with my wife. She's quite astute and seized the chance to back down, so she listened to me. We had a talk, laid everything out on the table, resolved the conflict, and the matter was settled. Truth be told, it was hardly a major issue—just as Jinping said, "Nothing's unsolvable." He also reminded me to work on my own shortcomings, like my temper and my drinking. Since then, I've been more mindful of these things, and our family relations have remained harmonious. No further problems have arisen.

Interview Team: What do you eat each day?

Zhang Weipang: Every morning we made dumplings, made from cornmeal and bran. In the afternoon we had noodles, sometimes made from bean flour, sometimes from sorghum flour. We only got wheat flour once every seven or eight days – that stuff was scarce back then.

Interview Team: Were there any vegetables with your meals?

Zhang Weipang: Pickled vegetables, yes. After Xi Jinping returned, he mentioned how much he missed Liangjiahe's pickled vegetables after so long without them.

Interview Team: What was the pickled cabbage made from?

Zhang Weipang: Cabbage and yellow turnips. Chopped up and pickled until sour.

Interview Team: Was sauerkraut available year-round, or only at certain times? Zhang Weipang:

Sauerkraut would last about half a year, from September right through to March or April the following year.

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked

alongside us

. When fresh vegetables are available, we stop eating the pickled cabbage.

Interview Team: What vegetables were available then?

Zhang Weipang: Cucumbers, tomatoes (known as "yangsi" in Shaanxi dialect), aubergines, chillies—all home-grown, no money spent.

Interview Team: Did you have oil for stir-frying back then?

Zhang Weipang: Oil was scarce back then. We'd pick apricots from the hills, crack open the stones, crush the kernels inside, then heat them in the wok to produce a little oil for stir-frying.

Interview Team: Did you stay in touch with Xi Jinping afterwards?

Zhang Weipang: When Xi Jinping left, he gave me two cotton quilts, two overcoats, and a sewing kit. That sewing kit was made for him by his mother when he came to the commune; it was embroidered with three characters: "Mother's Heart". In those days, with no money for new clothes, garments were patched layer upon layer. A sewing kit to hold needles and thread was indispensable. It's not like today, where new clothes pile up and no one wears patched garments.

The quilt and overcoat Xi Jinping gave me wore out in those lean years when food and clothing were scarce. Only that sewing kit have I treasured all this time. I'm a simple farmer lad, rough and ready, not one for grand philosophies. I just felt Xi Jinping was family to me, so I kept that sewing kit as a memento. I held onto it for thirty-eight years, finally donating it to the county in 2013 for safekeeping by the state.

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

custody.

After Xi Jinping left, my family urged me to write him a letter. I said I wouldn't bother, that it wasn't my place to disturb him. That was my thinking.

In 1993, when Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe, I finally saw him face to face. I was planting wheat on the hillside when word came he'd arrived. I dashed down the slope and caught sight of him halfway down. Seeing me covered in mud, he didn't seem to mind at all. He grabbed my arm and asked after my family and me. I was so moved I couldn't find the words. He'd brought gifts for every household—clockwork alarm clocks, dried seaweed, tea—and before leaving, he handed me his business card, telling me to seek him out if I ever needed help.

When he returned to Liangjiahe in February 2015, I joined a dozen villagers waiting at the village entrance. Seeing him step from the car, I rushed over. Despite the years, he recognised me instantly. Just as before, he slapped my shoulder, called my name, and inquired about my living conditions, what we ate, and how many children I had. I told him life had improved greatly—we ate rice or white flour, had meat regularly, and could enjoy fresh vegetables all year round.

Immediately afterwards, Xi Jinping asked me "Wei Pang, how are you getting on now? What's your main occupation?" I replied "Comrade Xi, life's quite good now. I've five mu of terraced fields where I grow grain and vegetables for our own consumption. I also have ten mu of orchard land, and all my income now comes from that orchard." Xi Jinping asked "How much does your orchard earn?" I replied "They're all young trees. Last year was the first harvest, bringing in twenty-four thousand yuan." Xi Jinping asked "What were your total costs for that year?" I replied "Much of the management was provided free of charge by the township. Beyond that, my own costs for pesticides, fertilisers, herbicides, and labour wages came to twelve thousand yuan."

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked

alongside us

Xi Jinping remarked "Doubling your investment in the first year is quite respectable."

I replied "Yes. Next year will be even better. Costs won't increase much, but sales will double. In a few years when it reaches peak production, income will be much higher."

Xi Jinping was delighted "Well, Wei Pang, you're doing rather well then! Come on, take me to see your orchard!"

I replied, "Certainly!"

Xinping came before the Spring Festival in 2015. Now it's 2016, and what I told him back then—"costs will remain largely unchanged while sales double"—has come true. In 2015, my investment was fourteen thousand yuan, yielding over fifty thousand yuan in income.

In the past, when Xi Jinping served as our village Party secretary, we were motivated and had something to strive for. Now that he's President of the entire nation and General Secretary of the Party, we're even more determined and daring. Look at me – at my age, I'm still tending fruit trees and running **the "Apple Cooperative"**. Xi Jinping is striving, and so are we. When everyone works hard, our country will surely grow richer and stronger.

“Xi Jinping cured my leg a

Lü Housheng



Interview Team: Good day! During his time in Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping resided at your home for an extended period. Could you recount how you first came to know him?

Lü Housheng: When Xi came to our village as an educated youth, he was assigned to the Second Brigade. Our remote mountain hollow was very isolated, so the sudden arrival of educated youths was a novelty. Everyone went to see them. At first, we couldn't quite understand their speech, nor could they understand ours. But as we worked together, we gradually got to know each other.

After moving from Liu Jinlian's home, Xi Jinping and his group stayed with us for a period. My mother had passed away early, so I lived with my father. We had an extra cave dwelling, and after they moved in, I spent every day and night with Xi Jinping and the others, becoming even more familiar with them.

Interview Team: What stands out most in your memory from the time you lived together?

Lü Housheng: Xi Jinping was particularly fond of reading. His bed was piled high with books. Whenever he had a moment to spare, he'd pick up a book and read. After a day's labour, utterly exhausted, he'd still light a kerosene lamp and read until midnight, often ending up with

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

his face black with soot.

Once, when Xi Jinping was reading late into the night, I sat beside him smoking a cigarette to keep him company. By midnight, he grew hungry. With little to eat, we boiled some corn. We poured a bowl of corn into the pot and boiled it for a while, thinking it was cooked, but it was still underdone. So we ate that bowl of half-cooked corn.

I was born in 1955, so I was fourteen at the time, two years younger than Xi Jinping. Having attended school only briefly, I was illiterate, young, and rather narrow-minded. I remember thinking: Xi Jinping lugs around all these books, heavy as lead, you can't steam them or boil them, and he spends all day reading them – what good does it do?

The villagers all knew Xi Jinping read voraciously and possessed great learning, so they often visited his cave dwelling to chat with him, asking him to tell us country folk stories. Xi Jinping described what Beijing was like, its famous landmarks and historical sites. We'd only ever seen Tiananmen Square, the Monument to the People's Heroes, the Great Hall of the People, and the Summer Palace in propaganda posters. Hearing him describe them made the images far more vivid, and we learned about places not depicted in those posters.

We asked Xi Jinping whether Beijing had many cars. He replied that Beijing had quite a lot of vehicles—not just saloon cars, but also jeeps, lorries, vans, and those large public buses that stopped at fixed points, required tickets to board, and could carry dozens of passengers. At that time, very few villagers had ever been to the county town, and even fewer had seen such large buses. Hearing Xi Jinping's description, we were all astonished.

He also told us that our country was not yet a developed nation, and that even in the capital, Beijing, the number of vehicles was not excessive. In some developed countries' major cities, the roads were completely filled with cars, so congested that traffic barely moved. Hearing him speak like this, it felt like a dream to us then. We could scarcely believe our ears: the outside world was like this?

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

our ears: the outside world was like this?

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping left Liangjiahe, did you maintain any contact with him?

Lü Housheng: In 1993, having worked in Fujian for several years, he made time to return to Liangjiahe

to visit the villagers. He gave me his business card.

In 1994, whilst repairing my cave dwelling, a stone fell from the roof and struck my right leg. Without prompt treatment, the injury developed into osteomyelitis. Only when the condition worsened did I seek hospital care, spending thousands of yuan to no avail.

At the time, I was already strapped for cash from the cave dwelling repairs. This illness drained my entire savings and left me heavily in debt. Moreover, as the condition worsened daily, my leg deteriorated to the point where I could no longer bear weight and required crutches.

I truly felt at the end of my tether. Without further treatment, I feared my days were numbered. What would become of my wife and children? With no other recourse, I resolved to seek assistance from Xi Jinping and wrote him a letter. To my astonishment, he promptly sent me 500 yuan for travel expenses, urging me to seek treatment in Fujian. Upon receiving this remittance, I was profoundly moved, nearly brought to tears. It was my first time leaving Liangjiahe, my first journey so far afield. I took the train from Yan'an to Fuzhou. After a long and arduous journey, I finally arrived in Fuzhou and met Xi Jinping. He reassured me, telling me not to worry. My heart was filled with a thousand emotions. This time, Xi Jinping truly saved my life.

He quickly arranged for the hospital to treat me. Though his work kept him constantly busy, often taking him to the grassroots, whenever he was in Fuzhou city, he would visit me in hospital almost every evening.

At times, I felt uneasy and inquired about the medical expenses. Xi Jinping told me: "Hou Sheng, I'm willing to pay whatever it takes for your treatment." In truth, I understood that.

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

, salaries were generally low across our country, and Xi Jinping's pay wasn't particularly high either. He didn't have much in savings. Most of the medical expenses for my treatment came from Ms Peng Liyuan's money.

My leg recovered well during treatment in Fujian, and I was ready to be discharged. Yet I had no idea how much money Xi Jinping had spent on my care—probably tens of thousands of yuan. I was unable to repay him at the time, and even if I offered, he would never have accepted. I could only keep this debt in my heart.

After returning to Liangjiahe, several years passed before my condition unexpectedly relapsed. This time it was far more severe, and my leg could not be saved. In late October 1999, I underwent an amputation in Shanxi. Upon learning of this, Xi Jinping once again covered all my medical expenses. The following year, I travelled to Fuzhou to visit him and express my gratitude. By then, I was using a prosthetic leg, walking with a limp, but my physical recovery was excellent and my spirits were high. Upon seeing me, Jinping bent down with genuine concern to examine my prosthetic leg, repeatedly touching it as if assessing its quality. Then, with evident joy, he said: "Mr Hou, you've weathered the storm. Let's take a photograph together to mark the occasion!" *

My life is quite good now. My children have grown up and are both working away from home. Whenever the family gathers, I tell them: "It was Xi Jinping who saved my life!" *

In February 2015, when Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe, he stopped by my home for a while. Upon entering this familiar cave dwelling, he settled down by the kang as if it were his own home. I sat beside him, and we chatted about the changes in the countryside and life today. The Xi Jinping who once worked by kerosene lamp until midnight, his face often blackened by soot, has always been most concerned about how everyone is faring—their food, clothing, and housing conditions. His heart has always been with us ordinary folk.

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

'Jinping works just like us country folk - ^^'

Liu Jinlian



Interview Team: Good day! Upon entering, we noticed several pairs of cloth shoes and insoles displayed on the windowsill by your cave dwelling's entrance. They appear rather well-made. Did you craft these yourself?

Liu Jinlian: Yes, I made all of them myself. They may not be particularly attractive, but they're certainly sturdy and durable. Before last year's Spring Festival (referring to 2015), when Xi Jinping returned home, I gave him two pairs of cloth shoes and several pairs of insoles, all handmade by me. In his youth, when he toiled in the fields of Liangjiahe (a Shaanxi dialect term for hard physical labour), he wore these very shoes just like us farmers. Whenever his shoes wore out, I'd make him new ones. Back then, he and several Beijing educated youths lived in a cave dwelling south of my house. I was young myself at the time, and my shoes weren't particularly well-made, but once I finished them, Xi Jinping would simply take them and wear them without complaint. I didn't just make shoes for Xi Jinping; I made them for all the Beijing educated youths living here.

Interview Team: Do you still live in those cave dwellings?

Liu Jinlian: Not anymore. On the eighteenth day of the twelfth lunar month two years ago (referring to 2014), I moved up here (pointing to a slightly higher cave dwelling in her courtyard). Those caves were dug decades

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

years ago. They're terribly damp now. I'm getting on in years and can't stand it, so I moved up here. It's better up here—not damp, and the light is good.

Those caves are uninhabited now. However, on 13th January 2015, several former Beijing educated youths—Dai Ming, Wang Yansheng, Yang Jingsheng and others—returned to visit me and the villagers of Liangjiahe. They stayed the night there. We chatted away, and before we knew it, it was afternoon. I said "Why leave today? Stay at my place." They replied, "Fine! We'll sleep in our old bunks from our youth—to relive those days." Though now living in Beijing's high-rises, they were delighted to stay in these damp, chilly earthen caves. Though conditions were poor, as they put it "The commemorative value outweighs everything else." After they settled in I brought them a kettle of hot water and chatted with them for a while. One bunk remained empty. I remarked, "This was Xi Jinping's bunk. You remember him, don't you?" They replied, "Of course we remember! Xi Jinping is terribly busy these days. Who knows when he'll find time to visit Liangjiahe?"

As luck would have it, precisely one month after those Beijing educated youths departed, Xi Jinping arrived on 13th February. He remembered my home vividly. When I welcomed him in, he stepped through the courtyard gate, spotted the familiar cave dwellings, and pointed to the outermost one "This is where I stayed when I first came to Liangjiahe." Then, gesturing towards the other two caves, he remarked, "Your father and mother lived in this one, while you and your wife occupied that one." I replied, "Quite right. You haven't forgotten after all these years." Xi Jinping responded, "How could I forget? During your honeymoon year, we educated youth even came to celebrate your wedding night!"

Interview Team: When did you get married, approximately?

Liu Jinlian: It was two or three months after Xi Jinping and the others arrived in Liangjiahe.

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

When we married, those Beijing youngsters witnessed a rural wedding for the first time. Being young and fond of revelry, they came to play pranks on our wedding night that very day. Not only the six educated youths from Team Two, but also those from Team One, along with villagers—there were so many people, it was incredibly lively.

After my wedding, the Beijing educated youths continued living in our home. Xi Jinping had a truly excellent disposition—kind and approachable (a Shaanxi dialect term meaning warm and easy-going). He spoke kindly and got on very well with both my husband and me.

My wife, Zhang Qingyuan, was the production team leader at the time. Every day she led Xi Jinping and the other Beijing educated youths into the mountains to build dams and terraced fields, enduring hardship and labour. Xi Jinping could endure the toil and hardship of the work, showing not a trace of the delicate sensibilities one might expect of a city boy.

When carrying manure from the village to the fields, the shoulder poles chafed his shoulders raw, layer upon layer of skin peeling off and bleeding. He would remove his shirt and pad his shoulders with it. If the padding was too thin, it offered no relief and the poles still rubbed unbearably; if too thick, he couldn't exert himself properly and the poles would slip off. Before long, thick calluses formed on Xi Jinping's shoulders. He no longer feared the chafing of the pole and discarded the need for padding.

In summer, the sun here is mercilessly hot, the weather dry and stifling. Xi Jinping's skin would burn red, then peel away. That hardship was no ordinary city child's to endure. Sometimes, seeing him toil so hard, my wife would say, "Xi Jinping sit down and rest awhile." But Xi Jinping wouldn't stop. He'd say, "It's alright, let's finish this bit first." And so he'd keep working for hours on end without a break. That's just how he was—he wouldn't rest until the job was done. He simply couldn't stop until it was finished. Within less than two years, most of the Beijing educated youth had returned to the city. But Xi Jinping,

family's political circumstances, he couldn't leave. So he endured the hardship bit by bit, gradually becoming a strong labourer who could earn ten labour points a day.

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us
a strong labourer who could earn ten labour points a day.

My wife held him in high regard. She confided in me "Look, Xi Jinping is a Beijing lad, from the big city, yet he works just like us country folk, sparing no effort. He's educated, eager to learn, and endures hardship – truly remarkable."

Interview Team: Xi Jinping lived in your home for quite some time. What was your impression of him?

Liu Jinlian: Xi Jinping got on splendidly with us! He called my mother "godmother," and she adored him, thinking this young man was well-mannered and educated. Whenever we had anything tasty at home, she'd think, "I must send some over for Jinping."

After we had children, the educated youth no longer stayed at our house. But whenever he had free time, Jinping would drop by to visit our elderly relatives and cuddle our little ones.

He always adored children and often took mine out to play. All my children were very fond of him and would follow him about constantly. When he left in 1975, my eldest daughter was six. Being too young to understand, she cried incessantly, clutching his clothes and refusing to let him go.

Interview Team: Did you meet Xi Jinping on either of his two subsequent visits to Liangjiahe to see his old friends and neighbours?

Liu Jinlian: Yes, I did. Xi Jinping returned once in 1993. My husband was still alive then, and both men were deeply moved upon meeting. When my husband spoke with him, he said: "Jinping, you've come back, but why didn't you bring your wife along?"

Villagers of Liangjiahe: Xi Jinping ate, lived and worked alongside us

Xinping replied "She had matters to attend to this time and couldn't make it. I'll bring her next time."

In 2015, when Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe, Peng Liyuan accompanied him. Xi Jinping introduced her to the villagers, saying "This is my wife."

It was just before the Spring Festival, and Xi Jinping had bought many New Year provisions for the villagers. He brought flour, oil, over ten pounds of meat, and a pair of Spring Festival couplets to my home.

When Xi Jinping visited my home, we chatted. He asked, "Where do you live now?" I replied, "I live in the cave dwelling up above. My wife has passed away."

Upon hearing of my wife's passing, Xi Jinping grew visibly saddened. He inquired "What illness took her?" I replied "Asthma and emphysema."

Xi Jinping sighed and remarked "Ah, it wasn't a particularly severe illness. Wasn't it treated properly?" explained "At the time, our family faced financial hardship. Our son was getting married, and there were many other matters to attend to. We simply didn't have the means." money left. I didn't contact you then either, as I didn't want to trouble you." He asked "How are you managing now?"

I said "My life is splendid now. Food, clothing, daily necessities—I've everything I need. My health is splendid too."

At this point, I introduced my eldest daughter to Xi Jinping—the very child who had once clung to his coat, refusing to let him leave.

I said "This is Caiyun. See how she's grown?"

Seeing her, Xi Jinping smiled warmly and exclaimed "My, you really have grown up!"

Before departing, Xi Jinping shook my hand. He said "When I have the time, I'll come and visit you again."

I replied "That would be lovely, Xi Jinping. Do come back often when you can."

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Interviewee: Hei Yingui, born 1948, student at Beijing Huiwen Middle School. In January 1969, he was sent to Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province, alongside Xi Jinping as part of the same cohort of urban youth assigned to rural areas. He was allocated to Guanzhuang Brigade, Guanzhuang Commune. In 1973, he was seconded to serve as Secretary of the Youth League Committee at Tuojachuan Commune. He later worked at the Weinan Power Supply Bureau in Shaanxi Province before being transferred back to Beijing in 1989. He retired in 2008.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan et al.

Interview date: 13 December 2016

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Interview Team: Constructing biogas facilities was a major practical initiative Xi Jinping implemented for villagers during his time in Liangjiahe. You accompanied Xi Jinping to Sichuan to study biogas technology. Could you describe your experience during that study trip?

He Yinggui: Certainly. I transferred my Beijing household registration in December 1968 and arrived in Yanchuan County on 17 January 1969.

We were on the same special train for educated youth, but having been in the countryside for several years, we only met when we went to Sichuan together to study biogas production. Before that, I knew he was stationed in Liangjiahe Village, Wenanyi Commune, but we had never met.

There were over 1,400 Beijing educated youth in Yanchuan County. From 1970 onwards, the state gradually arranged employment for some of us. Children of workers and peasants from more difficult family circumstances were mainly employed in local service industries. In 1970, a cohort was recruited by state-owned Third Front factories, while others departed for military conscription. By November-December 1972, eighty to ninety per cent of educated youths had left the countryside, many secured employment primarily within Shaanxi. Examples included factories under the Ministry of Aviation Industry's Hanzhong 012 System, Haisheng Bearing Factory, the Power Supply Bureau, Baoji Automated Railway, and so forth. Those who remained included our group of over forty Beijing educated youths, who were appointed as cadres by the local county Party committee. The remainder who could not leave were mostly those with family background or political issues—such as parents who had not yet been rehabilitated, or parents with historical problems. General Secretary Xi Jinping was among this category at the time. This group was quite small, perhaps two or three, three or four people per commune—very few indeed.

I was assigned to serve as a cadre in Tuojia Mountain Commune in early 1973, initially as a clerk. After two or three months, I was appointed Secretary of the Youth League Committee, a position I held for about two years. That year coincided with Premier Zhou Enlai accompanying Vietnamese leaders on an inspection tour of Yan'an. Upon seeing the conditions in northern Shaanxi, he remarked...

With tears in his eyes, he remarked: "I never imagined that so many years after national liberation, the people of Northern Shaanxi still endure such hardship." He then directed Beijing to provide comprehensive support to Yan'an, setting the ambitious targets of transforming the landscape within three years and doubling grain production.⁴ The Premier's declaration caused a tremendous stir in Northern Shaanxi at the time. Everyone was determined to tackle the region's poverty and backwardness, as well as its inability to achieve self-sufficiency in grain. Against this backdrop, some cadres from our Yanchuan County proposed taking responsibility for specific rural teams. I too volunteered to return to the place where I had originally been sent down as a young intellectual, thus moving back from Tuoja Mountain Commune to the Guan Zhuang Brigade of Guan Zhuang Commune, where I had previously worked. In early 1971, Beijing dispatched a group of cadres to Yan'an in accordance with Premier Zhou's directives. Their dual purpose was to assist Yan'an's development and alleviate the living difficulties faced by educated youth. Among them was an experienced cadre from Haidian District named Zhang Zhisun, who arrived in Yanchuan County to serve as a member of the County Party Standing Committee and Deputy Director of the County Revolutionary Committee. The initiative to study biogas production in Sichuan emerged from Xi Jinping's proposal and received strong backing from Zhang Zhisun.

It transpired that after the People's Daily featured a report on biogas promotion in Sichuan on 8 January 1974, Xi Jinping took notice and developed an interest. He conceived the idea of travelling to Sichuan to study biogas production as a solution to the local shortages of coal and firewood. He shared this notion with Zhang Zhisun, only to discover that Zhang had independently arrived at the same conclusion – their plans coincided perfectly. Old Zhang reported the plan to study biogas production in Sichuan to the Yanchuan County Party Committee. The committee attached great importance to it, and County Party Secretary Shen Yang decided to select six comrades from three communes. These communes were Wen'anyi, Chengguan, and Guan Zhuang. Guan Zhuang was represented by myself, accompanied by a stonemason from our brigade. Wen'anyi was represented by Xi Jinping, who led a farmer from his brigade; at that time, Xi Jinping had already become the brigade secretary. Chengguan Commune also sent one cadre and one worker. Together with Zhang Zhisun, our group of seven formed the Yanchuan County delegation to study biogas technology in Sichuan. (It is understood that shortly after reading the People's Daily report, Xi Jinping travelled to Suining and other locations in Sichuan with three Beijing-based cadres stationed in Yanchuan, including Bai Genzhu, to learn biogas techniques. Upon returning to Liangjiahe,

and dug a pit beside the educated youth dwellings, which produced biogas upon completion. The county's organisation of the seven individuals to Sichuan likely constituted Xi Jinping's second in-depth study of biogas in the province, followed by Yanchuan's large-scale biogas initiative.)

Interview Team: Could you elaborate on your experience travelling to Sichuan with Xi Jinping to study biogas?

He Yingui: It was around December 1974. Our group of seven travelled by coach from Yan'an to Tongchuan, then took the train to Chengdu. As we were heading to Sichuan to learn about biogas production, everyone on the train was particularly excited, filled with intense anticipation. What fuelled this anticipation? Although northern Shaanxi produced coal and oil, ordinary people couldn't afford them. They still used kerosene lamps, and some couldn't even afford the kerosene for those lamps. After adopting biogas, the people of Sichuan had resolved their rural challenges: fuel for cooking, lighting, and even electricity generation. These were precisely the most pressing needs in northern Shaanxi, and the issues we felt most urgently required addressing after being sent there to work in the countryside. As the brigade secretary, Xi Jinping faced these problems head-on. To transform rural living conditions and alleviate hardship, tackling these issues was paramount. Hence, our discussions throughout the journey were exceptionally animated.

Upon reaching Chengdu, we independently secured lodgings at a hotel before notifying the Sichuan Provincial Biogas Office. Their response was one of urgency. Many provincial and local leaders in Sichuan were cadres who had come south from Shanxi. Upon learning that visitors had arrived from the revolutionary holy land of Yan'an, they immediately arranged for us to be transferred to the provincial guesthouse and granted us an audience. Mention of Comrade Xi Zhongxun evoked particularly warm sentiments. Following the meeting, the Provincial Biogas Office arranged for two jeeps and assigned two comrades to accompany us throughout our study tour. They emphasised that it was their responsibility to ensure we witnessed, learned, and mastered the techniques of biogas production. Later, during our visits to various regions and counties for observation and study, the top officials of each locality personally accompanied us, with every detail of our itinerary meticulously planned and executed.

When the Provincial Biogas Office first received us, hosting delegations from across the nation to study biogas had become routine practice. They would take us sightseeing, sample local delicacies, and arrange stays at county guesthouses. However, the Provincial Committee had emphasised that we must see, learn, and master the biogas technology comprehensively. Moreover, the officials accompanying us observed our earnest attitude towards learning, which significantly altered their approach. At that time, we genuinely inspected every biogas digester we encountered, asking detailed questions at each location. We observed various types of digesters: stone-built, earthen pits, brick structures, earthen pits lined with cement, and slate-lined constructions. We learned precisely which soil types suited specific digester designs, construction methods, and the detailed construction of feed inlets, effluent outlets, and sealing mechanisms.

Given the regional variations in biogas digester construction across Sichuan, we traversed 17

counties across ~~five~~ districts

counties over approximately 40 days. Some localities possessed conditions unattainable in northern Shaanxi, while many others shared similarities with our region. We examined these in meticulous detail. In comparable conditions, such as areas with abundant red clay—highly viscous, clinging to one's feet, and low in sand content—the biogas pits required only a light coating of lime mortar after excavation to become leak-proof. Where sand content was higher, we applied lime mortar mixed with sand or terracotta. Naturally, Shaanxi presented some distinct challenges compared to Sichuan. For instance, the soil lacked the resilience found in Sichuan, necessitating brickwork. When using stone slabs, we had to ensure the joints ~~were properly sealed~~. At the time, Xi Jinping frequently discussed with us that the key lesson to learn was ensuring the biogas digester remained watertight, capable of withstanding the pressure of a certain volume of water, and passing the water test on the first attempt. Once ~~water entered~~, removing it would be difficult; a leak meant the digester was rendered useless. Thus, leak-proofing was paramount. This was our primary focus.

In Sichuan, biogas digesters were initially constructed in 5-cubic-metre and 3-cubic-metre capacities. A

single 5-cubic-metre unit could...

Hei Yingui: Xi Jinping and I Travelled to Sichuan to Study

Biogas Production

Solving the cooking and lighting needs for a family of three; larger ones are typically built at 7-8 cubic metres, sufficient for most household requirements. In Sichuan, there are also collectively built ponds exceeding 100 cubic metres that generate electricity. These biogas ponds can be interconnected, allowing shared use of the generated power. Sichuan boasts numerous inventions, such as plastic switches, plastic pipes, water pressure gauges for biogas ponds, and various stoves and lamps – all handmade, which greatly appealed to us. Each day after learning Zhang Zhi sun would organise group discussions where we shared what we'd learnt, what we wished to hear more about, what we wanted to see further, and which issues remained unresolved. At the time, two topics dominated our discussions: how to ensure watertightness, and whether the items crafted by Sichuan farmers could be replicated back home. Further topics included the step-by-step excavation process for biogas digesters: the risks of entering the pit, methods to prevent accidents, the required curvature during digging, the dimensions of the opening, and the design angles for the outlet and inlet. The outlet needed positioning near the upper section of the digester, while the inlet should be placed as low as possible on the inner tank. Sealing these openings presented numerous technical details. We educated youths had no prior experience in construction or masonry, so we studied with great diligence, taking meticulous notes. For more intricate technical tasks, we had the stonemasons accompanying us demonstrate the work firsthand, so we could replicate it upon returning.

Interview Team: What did Xi Jinping learn during his inspection tour?

Hei Yingui: Xi Jinping was very young at the time, yet remarkably composed. He approached tasks with great diligence, a thoughtful and reflective individual who spoke little, possessing an introspective nature devoid of the ostentation often seen among children of officials. He and I first met when assembling for departure in Yanchuan County. We introduced ourselves as educated youths, and that was how we became acquainted. Among the educated youths sent to northern Shaanxi, whether you were the child of an official or a commoner made little difference; everyone shared the same status

equal—all toiling as farmers.

Upon arriving in Sichuan, we were mostly assigned to double rooms, and Xi Jinping and I shared one. At that time, I was slightly older than him. Living together and both being smokers, we became smoking companions.

Interview Team: What events during your studies in Sichuan left a deep impression on you?

He Yinggui: Indeed, many aspects of that study tour left a profound impression. Firstly, wherever we went in Sichuan, banners proclaimed: “A Warm Welcome to Comrades from the Revolutionary Base Areas for Inspecting and Guiding Our Province's Biogas Work” Such words deeply moved us. On one hand, the people of Sichuan referred to us as "people from the revolutionary base areas," the sacred land of Yan'an – a tremendous honour. On the other, while they politely called our visit one of "guidance," we were in fact there to learn. This made us acutely aware of the weighty mission and responsibility of our study tour, distinct from ordinary visits. Consequently, everyone adopted a serious and earnest attitude towards learning. During our final debriefing after the study tour, we resolved to report back to the county authorities with three key proposals: first, to establish a dedicated leadership team; second, to arrange for Sichuanese experts to visit us; and third, to procure as many of their cooking stoves as possible. Furthermore, we planned to implement pilot projects across our three production brigades, striving to achieve full biogas coverage throughout the village within three months.

Another profound impression was the peril encountered en route. After visiting Dayi County, we were returning to Chengdu when heavy rain began. Our vehicle was traversing mountainous terrain to reach the Chengdu Plain. On a steep mountain road, we encountered a sharp 180-degree bend. The car skidded and collided with the mountainside. We were all inside; had the brakes failed, we would have plunged over the cliff. It was extremely perilous, and everyone was terrified.

Moreover, some counties we visited were severely affected by schistosomiasis, with significant water pollution. Travelling to rural areas to study biogas production required wading through streams and paddling in water, making schistosomiasis transmission highly likely. Yet Xi Jinping and I paid it no mind, focused solely on completing our learning mission. At the county guesthouse, they specially prepared clean water for us to wash our faces, explaining that as northerners, our resistance might be weaker than the locals', fearing we might contract the disease.

That was the manner of our study. The staff at the Sichuan Province Biogas Office remarked, "You comrades from the revolutionary base areas truly possess remarkable resilience. We've never hosted a delegation like yours before. Previous groups merely paid perfunctory visits, skimming the surface. Yet you remained for over forty days, demanding to observe biogas pits constructed under every conceivable condition and learning every possible category. This is genuine study." Our dedication to learning deeply moved them. Looking back now, whenever we encountered a biogas digester, we didn't merely inspect it from the outside or shine a torch inside. We would climb down ladders to examine it thoroughly from within – a truly meticulous approach.

There was a minor incident during that study tour. Deyang County in Sichuan was a key stop on our itinerary. There, a machinery factory had modified diesel engines to run directly on biogas instead of diesel fuel. Once the diesel engine was started, it powered an electric generator. Upon arrival, we learned their technician was away on a training course and wouldn't return for several days. So Xi Jinping and I suggested to Comrade Zhang Zhisun that they return first, while we stayed behind for two days to collect our items from Deyang before heading back. Comrade Zhang agreed. While waiting at the factory, the two of us visited Dujiangyan and Mount Emei. Some might question whether this constituted a trip on public funds. In truth, we covered all expenses ourselves. Upon returning, we only claimed reimbursement for the train tickets from Chengdu to northern Shaanxi and accommodation costs incurred while conducting business in Deyang. Our stay on Mount Emei was on the mountain itself, incurring minimal expenditure.

Why mention this? During our visits to Mount Emei, Dujiangyan, and Erlang Temple, I observed a particular trait in Xi Jinping: he would meticulously copy down every pair of couplets adorning the gates—whether at Mount Emei's temples or Qingcheng Mountain's—and then ponder them intently. During our three nights on Mount Emei, we encountered university graduates who had become nuns. Xi Jinping engaged them in conversation: "Why did you choose monastic life over further education?" Some had grown weary of worldly affairs; others faced familial pressure to marry; still others sought admission to a religious college as a viable path forward. During our stay at the temple, we encountered several monks. Xi Jinping also conversed with them: "How do you manage daily life while tending to this temple? What occupies your thoughts each day?" and so forth.

Mount Emei stands over 3,100 metres above sea level. Throughout our entire ascent, we encountered scarcely a soul – just the two of us climbing. Rain began to fall, then snow and hail. The path was narrow, nowhere near as wide as it is today. We clambered upwards, gripping branches and leaves, taking two full days to reach the summit. On the mountain, besides the temple, we stayed at the astronomical observatory. We paid them ten yuan for a bowl of rice and a stir-fried vegetable dish – it was rather expensive. We witnessed the sunrise and even saw **the so-called "Buddha's light"** Mount Emei is a Buddhist holy site, and the Buddhist philosophy expounded by the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra here centres on knowledge and action. Many aspects of Xi Jinping's governance philosophy, as expressed in his speeches, also emphasise the unity of knowledge and action. Knowledge comes first – personal social practice and experience. Only when you have thoroughly understood and grasped something do you know what to do, to what extent, and how to achieve your goals. Knowledge and action run through his governance philosophy from start to finish.

I mention this to convey that Xi Jinping has long been a person who loves learning and thinking. His habit of copying down fine couplets he encountered, his tendency to probe deeply into novel matters, and his voracious reading during his time in the countryside all demonstrate that Xi Jinping is a person who reveres learning and

and a man of intellectual pursuit.

Interview Team: Did you return to Deyang after visiting Mount Emei?

He Yingui: Yes. After meeting the technician at that factory in Deyang, he provided us with a blueprint and outlined a method for enlarging the combustion chamber of a diesel engine. Naturally, he didn't specify precisely how large the combustion chamber should be enlarged to. He merely advised that enlarging it too much wouldn't work, nor would enlarging it too little, because within that confined space, there were numerous issues concerning the ignition point of biogas and the combustion point of diesel fuel. After returning from Sichuan, through repeated experimentation, we finally succeeded.

Interview Team: Did you commence biogas production immediately upon returning from Sichuan?

He Yinggui: Upon our return, the county established the Yanchuan County Biogas Office, with Zhang Zhisun appointed as its director. Though we weren't members of the office, our village was designated one of three county-level biogas pilot villages, alongside Liangjiahe Village, Guan Zhuang Village, and Chengguan Village. Our village initially constructed three biogas digesters—all earthen structures coated with mortar—and successfully ignited them. Xi Jinping's village also built several.

Interview Team: Did you encounter any difficulties while constructing the biogas pits?

Hei Yingui: The difficulties encountered during our trials were not particularly significant. Northern Shaanxi villagers possess experience in constructing cave dwellings and water reservoirs. We selected sites with the most favourable soil conditions and optimal soil composition. The first biogas digester was relatively small, with a capacity of just 3–5 cubic metres, so we did not encounter major difficulties. Moreover, we followed the blueprints meticulously to ensure the digester was leak-proof and maximised efficiency.

Apply a thin coat of plaster, use a generous amount of mortar, opt for higher-grade cement, reduce the sand content, and ensure it's finer-grained. That should suffice. In northern Shaanxi, they employ an excellent technique: using a small pickaxe to scrape the surface smooth. Their cave dwellings appear not plastered but scraped into shape. After over twenty days, one biogas digester finally ignited successfully, causing quite a stir. Previously, villagers had been utterly sceptical, declaring, "How could biogas cook meals or light lamps? Such things are impossible!" Naturally, the initial biogas digesters were very small, producing only a modest flame and limited gas output. The low yield stemmed from temperature issues – there were insufficient fresh leaves. As it was early spring, leaves were scarce, so we resorted to using old corn stalks, which naturally yielded poorer gas. Even so, we ultimately succeeded.

After county officials witnessed this, they launched a county-wide campaign to mass-produce biogas within **100** days. They mandated that our three villages achieve full biogas conversion, with 80% of households utilising it. Villagers were highly motivated, having witnessed biogas practical benefits firsthand and realising they could install it at home. The county government further provided policies to address cement, lime, and sand shortages. Villages with better resources across the county dispatched numerous workers to assist with biogas digester construction while simultaneously learning the techniques for biogas production, with the aim of county-wide dissemination. These villagers arrived carrying provisions, set up camp here, and worked alongside us, for which we provided some subsistence allowances. Thus, within **three** months, our three villages achieved 85%–90% biogas utilisation, with even the most disadvantaged households able to light lamps with biogas. This approach was termed **the** "mass campaign for rapid **progress**" at the time. The Yan'an Correspondence once published a report titled "The Story of Fire-Making," detailing Yanchuan's biogas initiatives. Back then, the county boasted **3,000** biogas digesters. Provincial field meetings were held in the county seat and Liangjiahe, with Liangjiahe—where Xi Jinping served as both educated youth and brigade secretary—being the focal point for visits. His approach stood out for its distinctive features and outstanding results. During the rollout, both our village, Guan Zhuang,

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and Liangjiahe each constructed two large biogas digesters, both intending to generate electricity from biogas. Xi Jinping and I each took a set of blueprints to consult the county agricultural machinery company on implementation. We enlarged the combustion chambers, and once completed, successfully drove the engine. This enabled biogas-powered electricity to run the film projector, allowing us to watch movies. If biogas was insufficient, we used large gas bags to collect it from households for supplementation.

Interview Team: In learning about biogas production, what qualities and characteristics did you observe in Xi Jinping?

Hei Yingui: Xi Jinping was a man of few words, but he was deeply thoughtful, and his thoughts were always grounded in practical matters. For instance, when he saw the locally made stoves and lamps, he suggested taking samples back with him. He also hoped Sichuan would send skilled craftsmen to guide us in building biogas facilities. He proposed bringing back some of Sichuan's tobacco varieties for cultivation in northern Shaanxi, as they were high-yielding and well-suited for large-scale planting in the region. Then there was the rock-slab threshing machine from Sichuan. Sichuanese craftsmen set up two such machines in our village and in Xi Jinping's home village. Northern Shaanxi has no shortage of stone, and once built, this machinery is virtually indestructible. All these innovations stemmed from Xi Jinping's meticulous observation, thoughtful proposals, and persistent, earnest learning.

Interview Team: How do you think Xi Jinping's years as an educated youth influenced his later governance?

Hei Yingui: I believe many of the governance concepts put forward by General Secretary Xi Jinping since the 18th CPC National Congress are deeply connected to his past experiences. For instance, the current practice of first secretaries and village officials working at the grassroots level in rural areas shares historical parallels with our era's rectification campaigns, line education initiatives, and the "three-year transformation, five-year doubling" stationing programmes. Sending officials to truly immerse themselves

to manage a village, understand its circumstances, address issues, and ensure the Party's rural policies are genuinely implemented can indeed resolve problems in a practical and targeted manner. This practice of immersing oneself in grassroots work back then is also connected to the current emphasis on targeted poverty alleviation. In recent years, I've frequently returned to northern Shaanxi, visiting several times annually. The region's challenges remain persistent: poverty alleviation funds often fail to reach their intended destinations. This occurs because many projects require funding from multiple levels – national, provincial, and local matching contributions. Local governments frequently cannot meet their share due to insufficient funds. Consequently, projects costing 30,000 yuan are expected to deliver outcomes requiring 50,000 yuan, inevitably compromising quality and other aspects. Xi Jinping spent considerable time in rural areas and served as a county Party secretary. ~~I~~ has a deep concern for matters concerning agriculture, rural areas, and farmers, and ~~rural~~ conditions. Therefore, I believe the national policy of targeted poverty alleviation has now been effectively implemented and is well-executed. Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis on ensuring cadres fulfil their responsibilities. Assessing an official's sense of responsibility by examining the actual conditions of a locality truly hits the nail on the head.

Another key aspect concerns impoverished counties. While the central government has consistently advocated for these counties to shed their poverty designation, many actually resist this change. Even after meeting poverty alleviation standards, they cling to the label to continue receiving fiscal subsidies. Consequently, numerous officials lack genuine motivation to resolve rural poverty at its root. Thus, the precise identification of impoverished counties directly determines the accuracy of national policies and support measures – an area where I believe efforts have been exceptionally well-targeted.

Recently, the People's Daily highlighted the significant potential for rural youth returning from urban employment to contribute meaningfully to their hometowns. Should this generation of rural youth genuinely return to their villages, it would represent a stark contrast to our generation's experience as educated youth sent to the countryside. Back then, we were tasked with transforming city dwellers into farmers, undergoing re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants. Yet even under that guiding ideology, the educated youth objectively brought urban civilisation and culture, yielding many unexpected cultural outcomes. At the very least, children in northern Shaanxi gained a different understanding of hygiene and knowledge. Now, when these rural youths

returning now bring with them the internet, entirely new methods of agricultural production, fresh cultivation concepts, and a completely updated understanding of agricultural markets. Their impact will therefore be immense.

Interview Team: What role do you believe Northern Shaanxi played in Xi Jinping's subsequent development?

Hei Yinggui: I believe an individual's development is shaped by multiple factors—personal disposition, social environment, and so forth. Back then, Yanchuan County produced a cohort of exemplary figures: besides Xi Jinping, there were Ding Aidi, Sun Lizhe, Ai Ping, Shi Tiesheng, Tao Zheng, and others. The emergence of this group was intrinsically linked to the prevailing environment. Foremost among these factors were the local villagers. The care and affection shown by the people of Northern Shaanxi towards the Beijing educated youth was unmatched in many other regions. They treated the Beijing youth with the same sentiment they held for the Central Red Army and Chairman Mao. They regarded you as Beijing's educated youth, equating you to children close to Chairman Mao, or even viewing you as Chairman Mao's own children. It was with this mindset that they welcomed you. The period when we were sent to the countryside coincided with the most arduous and difficult times in northern Shaanxi. How arduous? Despite over twenty years since liberation, they still practised primitive slash-and-burn farming. Beyond kerosene and salt, daily life lacked even basic condiments like soy sauce or vinegar. There might be a little chilli powder, and those better off might have some sesame seeds to grind into sesame salt. Throughout the year, aside from pickled vegetables in winter, there was scarcely any fresh produce to eat in summer. The annual grain harvest scarcely lasted six months. At that time, the state grain quota was heavy, and the grain procurement task was equally burdensome. As a cadre, I understood this deeply. The primary duty of a cadre was to ensure farmers planted their crops and delivered the grain to the state granaries – that was your task. Under these circumstances, the common folk reasoned What do city folk eat? Don't they rely on us farmers to grow it? If we don't plant grain, what will they eat?♦

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It was this simple sentiment that sustained their willingness to hand over their grain for state purchase. Naturally, they harboured grievances, yet even when they themselves lacked sufficient food or clothing, they still surrendered their household's grain, fulfilling the quota. They would worry about their own shortages the following year.

It was precisely under these circumstances that a brigade had to accommodate over thirty Beijing educated youths who required full rations. This grain had to be drawn from their own allocated shares, yet no one complained that "the educated youths are snatching our food." Instead, they willingly welcomed and accommodated these newcomers. It can be said that the success of this cohort was largely due to the people of northern Shaanxi passing on their reverence for the Central Red Army and Chairman Mao to their descendants. They believed these city children had never endured hardship or suffering, and resolved to treat them as their own offspring. Thus, when the educated youth arrived in northern Shaanxi, it was the villagers who helped them overcome the challenges of daily life. Their acceptance and tolerance enabled us to stay in this place; otherwise, many would have fled.

The villagers taught us labour skills personally, sparing us from heavy or exhausting tasks. If you expressed fatigue or had another reason for not working, they never reproached you. Should you fall ill, many would visit you. If they had a morsel of something tasty or a bit of meat, they would invite you to their home to share it. This bond is something only educated youths who served in Northern Shaanxi can truly understand. Whether they stayed for one or two years, or seven or eight, it remains an indelible experience.

From another perspective, the Beijing educated youth organised themselves locally and endeavoured to accomplish certain tasks for the countryside, which indeed constituted an indelible contribution. Establishing biogas facilities was one such endeavour, while assisting the people of northern Shaanxi in vegetable cultivation was another. I recall that in 1978, upon my departure from Yan'an, I visited Qiaogou in Yan'an, where numerous cadres dispatched from Sijiqing in Beijing had already assisted the locals in constructing vegetable greenhouses.

Shen Yang, then Party Secretary of Yanchuan County, showed great concern for the Beijing educated youth.

Many may have seen the film

The Heroic Sons and Daughters. This veteran secretary bore a striking resemblance to the character of Wang Fang's father in the film: wearing a woolen cap with a military overcoat, tall and slender with a sharp nose and piercing eyes. He was precisely that sort of cadre. When we visited, he was likely around fifty years old. Drawing on his years of revolutionary experience, he genuinely treated us educated youths as his own children. In our county, no fewer than 100 educated youths joined the Party, and nearly seventy or eighty became teachers. Secretary Shen adeptly mobilised these youths for various undertakings, and once accomplished, he actively summarised and promoted their successes. Whether it was Sun Lizhe or Ding Aidie, many initiatives gained direct attention from the county Party secretary. Take Xi Jinping's admission to the Party and his education: only by dismantling the erroneous ideologies and even erroneous policies of the Cultural Revolution could he truly be regarded as a promising young man, a trustworthy individual. This enabled his Party membership, his appointment as village Party secretary, and ultimately his recommendation for university admission. Without the county Party secretary's boldness, his understanding of the issues, and his trust in the educated youth, these achievements would have been impossible within the historical context of the time. I hailed from an intellectual family, which carried unfavourable political baggage at the time. Yet I joined the Party in 1970, became a state cadre in 1972, and was even recommended to study at Beijing Institute of Chemical Technology in 1971 – outcomes unthinkable in most regions. In our county, however, such advancements faced little obstruction, at least not in the county Party secretary's mind. Thus, he could boldly employ these cadres, allowing both Beijing-based officials and Beijing educated youth to participate in rectifying education and leadership teams. Throughout this process, he did not view you as mere educated youth or ordinary peasants, but rather as knowledgeable, cultured young people whose political awareness and comprehensive qualities could advance Yanchuan County's work. I once summarised it thus: we educated youths took the food rations from the people of northern Shaanxi, we took their recruitment quotas for labourers, we took their quotas for administrative positions, we took their conscription quotas, we took their teacher admission quotas. Yet no one felt we had

'taken' them away. Instead, they willingly relinquished these quotas. As depicted in Lu Yao's novel *World*, how desperately the local rural youths yearned for a single quota – even to join the army or become a teacher! Yet after we educated youth arrived, these quotas were almost entirely filled by us. The locals bore no resentment; instead, they joyfully saw us off.

Thus, northern Shaanxi is truly a land of wonder. It is precisely this capacity for embracing others that nurtured and elevated so many individuals. Thus I regard it as a blessed land, naturally bestowing abundant fortune upon its people. Like the crook of a human arm, it forms an embrace. For many who lived here, their growth, their chosen paths, and their achievements owe much to this soil, to its people, and to its discerning local leaders. The emergence of many great figures throughout history is undoubtedly shaped by the soil and environment, as well as their own accumulated knowledge and diligent efforts. The reason Xi Jinping's subsequent path to growth was so solid and steady, I believe, is that his seven years of experience in Northern Shaanxi laid a crucial foundation.

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Interviewee: Liu Mingsheng, male, Han ethnicity, born August 1950 in Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province. Joined the Communist Party of China in April 1972; commenced employment in March 1970. Secondary technical education. Held positions including Youth League cadre and educated youth specialist at Wen'anyi Commune, Yanchuan County; Deputy Director and Deputy Party Secretary of the commune; Director of Majiahe Commune; Party Secretary of Tuojachuan Commune; Party Secretary of Fengjiaping Commune; Party Secretary of the County Foreign Trade Bureau; and Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Town. Served as Director of the Economic Committee of the Yanchuan County CPPCC from 1994 to 2002; retired from the Yanchuan County CPPCC in 2002.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 29 December 2016

Location: Residence of Liu Mingsheng, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province

Interview Team: During Xi Jinping's period of rural placement in Liangjiahe, you were serving in Wen'anyi Commune, Yanchuan County. Could you recount how you came to know and interact with Xi Jinping at that time?

Liu Mingsheng: I entered junior secondary school in 1963 and graduated in 1966. In 1970, I was assigned to work at Hejiawan Commune. In 1971, I was recruited by the county authorities as a commune youth league cadre and assigned to Wen'anyi Commune in March. At that time, I was not yet a formal cadre but a contract cadre, becoming a full cadre in 1977.

For the initial period, no specific duties were assigned, though the leadership occasionally dispatched me on tasks. Around June or July, I was assigned to Liangiata Village as the designated cadre responsible for that area—the very brigade where Lei Rongsheng worked during his rural placement. At the time, the village lacked communal kilns. The village secretary, noting we were both young and that the educated youth's cave dwellings were tidy, arranged for me to share accommodation with Lei Rongsheng. On one occasion, Lei Rongsheng invited me to accompany him to Liangjiahe. He mentioned that he had a younger brother named Lei Pingsheng living there, and that Xi Jinping—a classmate from the August First School and son of Xi Zhongxun—also resided nearby.

We northern Shaanxi folk all knew Xi Zhongxun – he'd led the revolution here, served as Secretary of the Northwest Bureau, and later became Vice Premier of the State. My initial thought was that, being the offspring of such high-ranking officials, there might be a sense of distance between us, and I wasn't sure how welcome we'd be. Eventually, unable to resist Lei Rongsheng's invitation, I went along to Liangjiahe.

Upon arriving in Liangjiahe, we introduced ourselves. They were all very warm and gradually struck up conversations, and so we became acquainted. Having come from big cities, they were well-travelled, well-mannered, and courteous. After chatting, I mentioned I should return. They all insisted I stay, inviting me to lodge in their cave dwelling. There was a large earthen bed within the cave, so I settled in with them. Come evening, we chatted and grew more familiar. Though rural life was hard then, every household kept a few hens, so eggs were available. Oil was scarce—only a little sesame oil, used only for frying New Year cakes.

only a little was used when guests came; they were too precious to eat themselves. Lei Pingsheng took a bowl and bought half a bowl of sesame oil from a fellow villager, along with two yuan's worth of eggs. I remember it vividly: Lei Pingsheng stir-fried eggs with tomatoes. Before that, in our northern Shaanxi, we'd simply fry eggs in oil, perhaps adding scallions or chives at most. We'd never stir-fried eggs with tomatoes. I remarked "You city folk really are **big-city people**!"

With our respective backgrounds established, we began discussing social matters and our educational paths. All the youngsters had schooling—I'd finished junior high—so we shared a foundation of general knowledge: history, geography, and such. That gave us common ground. They spoke of village life too. Having come from Beijing to work in the countryside for two years now, they'd settled in, got to know everyone, and understood each household's circumstances. Coming from Beijing to Yanchuan hadn't been easy—they'd faced many hurdles, adapting to rural life and having to manage everything themselves.

Thus, we became acquainted. Sometimes I was in the village, sometimes at the township government office. When the three of them came to Wen'anyi to handle affairs, post letters, or buy supplies, they would seek me out for a meeting and a chat. Occasionally, if it grew late and they couldn't return, they'd stay overnight at the commune. When I travelled from Liangjiata to Wen'anyi Commune for meetings and study sessions, I'd pass through Liangjiahe and drop by Jinping's cave dwelling for a chat and a drink of water. Being young, we bonded quickly and grew closer over time.

In 1972, the commune's specialist officer for educated youth was transferred away, leaving some seventy or eighty educated youths still in our commune. The commune secretary told me "The county won't be sending another specialist officer for the educated youth. We're short-staffed, so we won't be appointing one either. As a Youth League cadre, you'll take over the specialist officer's duties. Should anything arise, you'll need to shoulder the responsibilities." Since the leadership had assigned me **b**I took on all the responsibilities, overseeing the educated youth's affairs. This involved organising meetings, recruiting workers, distributing documents, and managing records and other administrative tasks.

and other such tasks.

In 1973, the leadership assigned me to Liangjiahe as the village cadre. My mindset at the time was simple: wherever the leadership assigned me, that's where I would go. I was wholly committed to fulfilling the tasks entrusted to me with utmost effort. Upon arriving in Liangjiahe Village, I came to know Xi Jinping much better.

Interview Team: During yesterday's interview with Yang Shizhong, he mentioned that Xi Jinping's admission to the Party and appointment as village Party secretary were both approved at the same meeting. Could you recall the circumstances at that time?

Liu Mingsheng: In August or September 1973, following unified arrangements by the county and commune authorities, a work team was organised to rectify conditions in Liangjiahe. I happened to be a member of that team.

After thoroughly investigating the situation, our team considered it beneficial to adjust the village leadership. The primary consideration was who would be suitable as Party branch secretary. Liangjiahe had a diverse population with over a dozen surnames, so the secretary needed to be someone with considerable prestige and broad acceptance. They had to be both capable and fair-minded. After much deliberation, everyone thought of Xi Jinping. As an educated youth from outside the village, Xi Jinping bore no blood ties to the villagers. Yet throughout his years there, he had consistently handled affairs impartially, ensuring everyone was treated equally. With this preliminary consensus formed, the next step was to consult the villagers and gather further information.

At that time, Xi Jinping was engaged in the Socialist Education Movement in Zhaojiahe Village and was not in Liangjiahe. However, we had known each other for nearly three years, and I was quite familiar with his circumstances. During my inquiries, every villager in Liangjiahe spoke of Xi Jinping as a man of steady composure. Though young, he handled matters with unwavering reliability and had never caused friction with anyone in the village. Residents also remarked on his distinctive character: a man of few words yet remarkably capable, commanding quiet respect. Moreover, Xi possessed extensive knowledge—spanning ancient and modern times, East and West, astronomy and geography—making him a truly cultured individual.

Xi Jinping would occasionally attend meetings and study sessions at the commune. There was a large table in the commune courtyard where everyone ate together, often chatting over meals. Consequently, the commune cadres also knew him well. I heard some commune cadres remark: "Jinping conducts himself with propriety and treats people with courtesy. He's a fine young man."

Overall, both the village and the commune held Xi Jinping in high regard. The investigation concluded that he possessed the necessary popular support to serve as village Party secretary.

Our working group convened to deliberate on this matter, exchanging views and reaching a preliminary consensus: appoint Xi Jinping as village Party secretary and Liang Yuming as village director. This arrangement would undoubtedly ensure the village's future endeavours were well managed.

Next, we approached Xi Jinping to discuss the matter. He was made aware that assuming the role of village Party secretary would entail significant responsibilities across all aspects of production. Furthermore, as an educated youth, he had opportunities for employment, military service, or university admission, meaning he could leave the village at any time. The key considerations were whether Xi Jinping was willing and whether he was mentally prepared for such a role. Xi Jinping stated: "If the village requires it, and both the organisation and the people approve, I shall abide by the organisation's arrangements." Thus, Xi Jinping agreed to serve as Party Secretary of Liangjiahe. We also approached Liang Yuming to discuss the matter. Liang Yuming was very open-minded; not only did he agree to the organisation's arrangement for his own work, but he also held Xi Jinping's work capabilities in high regard and fully endorsed Xi Jinping's appointment as Party Secretary.

Interview Team: Does one need to be a Party member to serve as village Party branch secretary?

Liu Mingsheng: Indeed. Our working group considered the matter comprehensively. During his years in Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping had consistently sought advancement and repeatedly submitted applications for Party membership. To become village Party secretary, the issue of his Party membership also needed resolving.

Judging from all aspects of his assessment, Xi Jinping fully met the criteria for Party membership. The sole issue was that of his father. Having become quite familiar with Xi Jinping, he told me his father had been labelled a 'major problem' due to a novel, Liu Zhidan. I thus came to understand the full circumstances surrounding his father's case. My thinking at the time was this: Xi Zhongxun had fought for the revolution in northern Shaanxi for so many years and held high office in the Central Committee, yet he was overthrown because of a single novel. His family suffered greatly as a result. We simply couldn't allow this matter to further hinder Xi Jinping's development. Besides, the key to joining the Party is still the individual's own conduct. As long as he meets the standards for Party membership, he should be admitted!

Interview Team: In his own essay "I Am a Son of the Yellow Earth," Xi Jinping recounts that his admission to the Party was facilitated by your assistance and support. The piece describes it thus: "**The Youth League Secretary came to see me, conversing for five days until we became 'close confidants.'** Later, after he succeeded as Director of the Commune's Educated Youth Office, the chief executive personally consigned my '**black materials**' to the flames." On one occasion, he pulled me aside to sit on a slab of green stone in a small mountain valley. He declared, 'I've retrieved your '**black materials**.' I asked, 'What use is retrieving these "black materials"?' He replied, 'Burn them!' I challenged, 'You dare? That's a capital offence!' He retorted, '**Why wouldn't I? I suspect these materials weren't sent by your school!**' The Youth League Secretary described in this passage is you, correct?

Liu Mingsheng: Well, that's all in the past now. Truthfully, everyone understood that Xi Jinping had come to the countryside as a teenager, his parents had joined the revolution at a young age, and there were no issues with their social connections. The core question was how to view Xi Zhongxun. As Vice Premier of the State, his family faced repercussions due to the controversy surrounding the novel Liu Zhidan.

Interview Team: What became of his Party membership application?

Liu Mingsheng: Subsequently, a meeting was convened to deliberate on the matter. The prevailing view was that Xi Jinping had been in our village for many years, his circumstances were well-known to all, and his conduct had been observed by everyone. He should not be subjected to further repercussions; he could be admitted to the Party. Consequently, the organisation approved his admission and appointed him as Secretary of the Brigade Party Branch.

Interview Team: What did Xi Jinping accomplish for the village after becoming secretary?

Liu Mingsheng: In 1973, I completed my assignment in Liangjiahe. By June 1974, I was transferred to Ma Jiagou Village in Wen'anyi for fieldwork. Occasionally, I would accompany cadres from Beijing supporting Yan'an on fact-finding missions to various villages, so I became quite familiar with Xi Jinping's work after he became secretary. He accomplished a great deal for the village: building dams, digging wells, establishing a sewing cooperative, a retail outlet, an ironworks cooperative, and a mill. Whatever the villagers needed, whatever he could conceive of, he set about organising it – and he did so with great vigour.

After becoming village Party secretary, Xi Jinping read newspaper reports about biogas projects in Sichuan. Biogas was a marvelous thing! Firstly, crops depended entirely on manure; the liquid from biogas digesters served as fertiliser, boosting grain yields. Secondly, biogas provided lighting. Thirdly, it fuelled cooking fires. The newspaper highlighted Sichuan's large-scale biogas initiatives and detailed their benefits. Our rural areas in northern Shaanxi were sorely lacking such an asset! After the Spring Festival, Xi Jinping travelled to Sichuan with a delegation from the county to study their approach. Upon returning, he immediately began constructing biogas tanks in Liangjiahe, determined to make this initiative a success.

Once he began this project, it captured my attention. This was unprecedented in Shaanxi – no one had ever attempted it before, and its success was uncertain. Consequently, I visited their village whenever possible. On one occasion in Liangjiahe, I observed the pit excavated and

and they were applying cement to the walls. Some time later, I saw the pit completed, awaiting biogas production. I grew impatient too, visiting Liangjiahe even more frequently. One day, upon arriving, I found Jinping bustling around the biogas digester. The water levels on both sides had risen, yet no biogas emerged. He paced anxiously, and upon seeing me, exclaimed: "I can't fathom why the biogas still won't work." I replied to Xi Jinping, "Don't fret! Didn't you visit Sichuan to study this? Could the material inside be clogged?" Xi Jinping examined the situation

and found a small stick

to poke around, but it didn't help. I fetched a thicker stick and together with Pingji we pushed hard into the pipe. We poked a hole through, and gas began hissing out. I lit a match, and with a 'whoosh' the flame roared to life. The stove blazed brightly, and the lamp shone clear. Since both stove and lamp had been installed earlier, we'd just been waiting for gas to ignite. Everyone was overjoyed, dancing and clapping. Ping said to me, "You've got a bicycle—jump on it and report this to the commune at once." In those days, there were no telephones or mobile phones; news travelled only by letter or messenger. I mounted my bicycle and raced from Liangjiahe to Wen'anyi, a distance of over ten li, pedalling as fast as the wind would carry me, eager to deliver this joyous news to the commune. This wasn't just Xi Jinping's achievement—it was Liangjiahe's triumph and Wen'anyi Commune's success!

Upon reaching the commune, I dashed into Secretary Bai's office and shouted "Xinping has made biogas work! It's producing gas! We lit the flame today!" Hearing this, Secretary Bai was overjoyed and reported to the county biogas office. Upon receiving the news, a large group from the county office arrived in a flurry. At last, biogas had been successfully achieved! Xinping had secured first place for our Wen'anyi Commune—this was Shaanxi Province's very first biogas digester. Soon after, Liangjiahe achieved full biogas coverage, and the provincial authorities even held a field conference here. Though the youngest when he arrived, Xinping not only became the village secretary but also served the longest tenure, transforming the village with remarkable vigour. Later, when the region convened the "Accumulation Conference" (a meeting to study Mao Zedong Thought accumulation

), Xi Jinping was the natural choice as delegate.

From this single initiative of establishing biogas, one could discern Xi Jinping's pioneering spirit.

In August 1975, the new enrolment process commenced. Xi Jinping felt that, having had limited schooling in the past, he still needed to pursue further education. As the education specialist of Wen'anyi Commune was on leave for special circumstances, the leadership assigned me responsibility for that year's enrolment work. During the commune's deliberations, though reluctant to let Xi Jinping go, they recognised they could not hinder his studies and thus decided to recommend him for university admission. When submitting applications to the county, Xi Jinping listed Tsinghua University as his first choice. I believed he deserved such a prestigious institution given his academic excellence and outstanding work ethic. I approached Zhao Rubin, the county education bureau chief who also headed the admissions office. Recognising Xi Jinping's exemplary conduct and significant achievements, Zhao concurred that he should be recommended for Tsinghua. Thanks to his exceptional merits, Xi Jinping secured support from all quarters and ultimately realised his aspiration.

Interview Team: What characteristics do you believe Xi Jinping possesses?

Liu Mingsheng: As village Party secretary, Xi Jinping was the leader of the entire community. He possessed a strong character and was by no means weak-willed. A leader cannot afford to be timid; without conviction, one cannot command respect or guide others effectively.

He also loved reading, displaying a maturity beyond his years. He remained composed in any situation, speaking to everyone in the village with great steadiness (Shaanxi dialect: very steady) and never joking around with others.

A defining trait in his approach to work is this: once he shoulders responsibility, he forms his own convictions, dares to act, and dares to tackle major undertakings. As secretary in Liangjiahe, he handled village affairs with down-to-earth pragmatism, guiding the villagers to work together in unison. At the central level, Xi Jinping has been relentlessly driving initiatives: the Chinese Dream, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the G20 – one after another, never resting. He must keep working, tackling major undertakings.

He is unafraid of strangers (a Shaanxi dialect expression), and even when meeting someone for the very first time, he can engage them in conversation once seated together. Sometimes, when people from all over the commune and neighbouring villages gathered at our commune headquarters – complete strangers sitting together in a large group – Xi Jinping could still engage everyone in conversation. This scholar with a fair complexion spoke with conviction and boldness. Wherever he sat, he could find topics for everyone to discuss, opening everyone up to talk freely. The atmosphere was never dull, but lively and animated.

He shunned formalism and the fashionable study sessions and campaigns of that era, instead setting his sights on substantial endeavours—delivering tangible benefits to the people. Such resolve and determination were rare indeed. His aim was to lead everyone in increasing grain production, ensuring sufficient food for all while also contributing surplus to the state.

Northern Shaanxi was riddled with mountain gullies, offering little fertile land. The main areas for increasing grain production were the dammed terraces. Building dams wasn't a task for one person alone; it required unifying everyone's thinking and mobilising the collective strength of the village. To mobilise such strength, rules and regulations were essential. Xi established strict regulations (Shaanxi dialect: very strict). Everyone followed these rules, which made no exceptions for anyone – be it Zhang San or Li Si. Failure to comply meant penalties or criticism and education. Every village undertaking required advance planning, tackling one task at a time. Back then, rural infrastructure projects truly tested the practical abilities of village cadres. If you could persuade everyone to build dams and terraces, you were a capable leader! Constructing several dams in the gully proved challenging, but once planned, work commenced. Several sites were identified: one near Liangjiata Village, another behind the village, and one at the village entrance. Dams would transform river channels into fertile fields, boosting grain yields. Liangjiahe, a medium-sized village in Wenanyi with over three hundred residents, faced a leadership test with this dam project. Firstly, leaders must persuade the villagers—each person counts as one.

but if they failed to persuade, each person counted for half. Second, they had to coordinate when to mobilise labour, how to allocate tasks, who would set explosives, who would pump water, who would push earth – only then could they lead everyone to work together and boost efficiency. The dammed land Xi Jinping helped villagers create covered a considerable area. To build so many dams in such a short time would have been impossible without considerable leadership ability.

When Xi Jinping departed for Tsinghua University, villagers voluntarily accompanied him on his journey. They saw him off for a considerable distance, accompanying him all the way to the next village. Some even continued their escort to Yanchuan County town. This was a genuine expression of affection. It is regrettable that mobile phones were not available at the time; had the scene been recorded, it would have left no room for doubt.

He spent the most precious years of his youth—seven years—in our remote mountain valley.

Interview Team: Did you maintain contact with Xi Jinping afterwards?

Liu Mingsheng: In 1993, Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe to visit the villagers. I was then Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Township. Upon hearing the news of his return, the village erupted with excitement. I immediately had the village cleaned, a large cauldron set up, two sheep slaughtered for stew, and fried oil cakes prepared. When Xi entered the village, men, women, and children surrounded him, pulling at his hands, chatting, taking photos – as if reunited with a long-lost relative. In the winter of 1989, when Xi served as Secretary of the Ningde Prefectural Party Committee, I stayed with him for several days.

days.

In 1994, I had business in Fuzhou. Xi Jinping invited me to his home, where I met Teacher Peng Liyuan and their daughter.

In 2007, when I was suffering from coronary heart disease and in poor health, Xi Jinping heard about it and arranged for both me and my

to Hangzhou for medical treatment.

In 2009, Xi Jinping returned to Yan'an and met with us again, showing great warmth.

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Interviewee: Bai Guangxing, male, born September 1936, native of Qingjian County, Shaanxi Province. Graduate of Shaanxi Suide Teachers College, member of the Communist Party of China, commenced employment in 1956. Successively held positions including Deputy Secretary of the Communist Youth League Yancun County Committee, Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune, Party Secretary of Yongping Commune, Director of the County Education Bureau, and Director of the Forestry Bureau.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 29 December 2016

Bai Guangxing: Joining the Party, promotion to cadre, and attending university were all outcomes of Xi Jinping's endeavours.

Interview Team: Good day! You were transferred to serve as Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune in May 1972. That

At that time, Xi Jinping had already spent four years working in the countryside in Liangjiahe. As the Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune, you personally witnessed the entire process of Xi Jinping joining the Party. Back then, Party membership represented political recognition for an individual. Given Xi Jinping's family background at the time, one can imagine the difficulties he faced in joining the Party. Could you elaborate on this aspect?

Bai Guangxing: In May 1972, I was transferred from my position as Deputy Head of the Yanchuan County Revolutionary Committee's Administrative Group and concurrently Director of the Party Building and Reorganisation Office to serve as Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune. During my tenure, I personally witnessed and participated in the processes of Xi Jinping's admission to the Party, his appointment as Secretary of the Brigade Party Branch, and his recommendation for university admission.

During Xi Jinping's placement in Liangjiahe, he served under three successive commune leaderships, including my own. I am unaware of the specifics regarding his Party membership application and approval processes under the first two administrations. In the autumn and winter of 1972, comrades responsible for political work at the commune raised with me the matter of Xi Jinping's Party membership application since his placement. For various reasons, his admission had previously remained unresolved. From this point, we began focusing on the matter and issued letters of inquiry based on the information Xi Jinping had provided in his earlier Party membership application. As the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution was still ongoing, the commune had limited capacity to send letters of inquiry to other provinces. The comrades handling political work therefore coordinated with the relevant personnel in the county Party committee's organisational department to issue the letters under the county Party committee's organisational department's name, aiming first to clarify the circumstances of his principal relatives.

By 1973, the background of his principal relatives had been fully ascertained through correspondence. In August 1973, the commune received Xi Jinping's new Party membership application submitted by the Liangjiahe Brigade Party branch. During the commune Party committee's deliberations on his admission, attendees cited evidence demonstrating that Xi had travelled from Beijing, thousands of miles away, to undergo rural placement in the arduous conditions of northern Shaanxi. Over the preceding four to five years, he had worked and lived alongside the villagers, forging deep bonds. His production labour exhibited diligence, practicality, and meticulousness.

Bai Guangxing: Joining the Party, promotion to cadre, and attending university were all outcomes of Xi Jinping's endeavours.

He had also demonstrated diligence in his studies and a commitment to political advancement, meeting the criteria for Party membership. However, his application lacked corroborating evidence from his father. While the nature of Xi Zhongxun's case remained unclear, the commune Party committee deemed it inappropriate to delay Xi Jinping's admission solely due to his father's circumstances. Following the meeting, the commune Party committee directly wrote to Xi Zhongxun's then-employer requesting external verification, specifically inquiring about the nature of his case. Promptly, the Party organisation at Xi Zhongxun's workplace replied that his case constituted an internal contradiction among the people, posing no impediment to his children's Party membership or academic advancement. This corroborating evidence resolved the issue, providing crucial grounds for Xi Jinping's Party admission, appointment as brigade secretary, and recommendation for university admission. By the time the commune received this corroborating evidence, the Liangjiahe Line Education Campaign had reached its mid-stage. After exchanging views with the commune's deputy secretary, we concluded that Xi Jinping had demonstrated commendable conduct and that the circumstances of his immediate family were now clear. We decided to defer consideration of his Party membership until the later phase of the campaign, when a new leadership team would be formed and new Party members recruited.

Interview Team: What transpired subsequently?

Bai Guangxing: In 1973, the campaign to emulate Dazhai in agriculture was at its peak. The key to this agricultural emulation lay in leadership. At that time, the primary issues within the leadership teams of the major production brigades were as follows: some leadership teams were weak and disorganised, lacking strong combat effectiveness; others were dominated by older members with conservative mindsets, unable to take bold strides forward. To address these issues, the commune Party committee concluded that advancing the campaign required first resolving leadership problems across brigades. Capable, proactive young members were promoted to brigade leadership roles to spearhead rapid development. The commune's primary method was implementing line education, with Liangjiahe and another brigade selected for the first cohort. Commune leaders formed line education task forces to station within these brigades. The duration was set at **approximately five** months, commencing in August 1973 and concluding by December. During this period, commune leadership began considering candidates for brigade Party branch secretary positions. For Liangjiahe Brigade, Xi Jinping was the primary contender. This was due to favourable evaluations from both commune cadres and villagers, coupled with his practical experience gained through

Bai Guangxing: Joining the Party, promotion to cadre, and attending university were all outcomes of Xi Jinping's endeavours.

During this period, commune leadership began considering candidates for brigade Party branch secretary. Xi Jinping was the foremost consideration for Liangjiahe Brigade. Commune cadres and villagers held him in high regard, and his practical experience in rural socialist education made him a suitable candidate for senior brigade leadership. The incumbent brigade secretary, Liang Yuming, also approached the commune to step aside, recommending Xi Jinping for the Party branch secretary role – a proposal that aligned perfectly with our commune Party committee's intentions.

Towards the latter stages of the campaign, the Liangjiahe Brigade's educational task force and Party branch submitted a list of prospective new Party members to the commune. The commune Party committee promptly convened a meeting to deliberate and approve Xi Jinping and other comrades as full members of the Communist Party of China. This was in accordance with the new Party constitution at the time, which stipulated that certain applicants could be admitted directly as full members without undergoing a probationary period. Upon the brigade receiving the commune Party committee's approval letter, the brigade Party branch convened a meeting of new and existing Party members to elect a new branch committee. This committee elected Xi Jinping as branch secretary and reported this to the commune. Concurrently, the Xiawen'anyi Brigade submitted its proposed adjustments to the principal leadership of the branch to the commune. The commune convened a Party committee meeting, deliberated upon, and concurred with the proposals from both brigade Party branches, approving Xi Jinping as Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe Brigade and Cao Heping as Party branch secretary of Xiawen'anyi Brigade.

In recent years, certain misrepresentations and inaccuracies have circulated regarding Xi Jinping's admission to the Party. For instance, the recently published book *Beijing Zhique in Yanchuan* includes an essay by a Beijing-born educated youth entitled "Unfading Memories of Ten Years in Northern Shaanxi," which states: "Shortly after the 1974 , I visited the county and stopped by his place. Outside the door, I overheard Secretary Shen Yang say: 'Comrade Bai, Xi Jinping has performed admirably in your jurisdiction. Why has his Party membership application been stalled for years? He is our Shaanbei lad. I've summoned you today to explain your reasoning.' (See p. 38) As a participant in these events, I can categorically state that this account is entirely fabricated and without foundation. Firstly, regarding Xi Jinping's Party membership application, county leadership never discussed the matter with me.

Bai Guangxing: Joining the Party, promotion to cadre, and attending university were all outcomes of Xi Jinping's endeavours.

Firstly, the commune proceeded methodically with its arrangements and deployments. Secondly, the Wen'anyi Commune Party Committee approved Xi Jinping's admission to the Party on 10 January 1974 (18 December 1973 in the lunar calendar), simultaneously appointing him as the **commune Party** branch secretary. How, then, could this conversation between Secretary Shen Yang and myself have occurred after the Spring Festival of 1974? Thirdly, in May 1972, I arrived at Wen'anyi to oversee the commune's work.

Xi Jinping's admission to the Party and simultaneously appointed him as secretary of the brigade Party branch. How could the conversation between Secretary Shen Yang and myself after the **1974** Spring Festival have occurred? Thirdly, I took up my post at Wen'anyi Commune **in May 1972**, yet Xi Jinping's Party admission was approved as early as January 1974. How could it be claimed that I obstructed Xi Jinping's admission for several years when less than two years elapsed between these events? Not only did I not obstruct him, but I conscientiously fulfilled my duties and actively facilitated the progress and growth of the educated youth.

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping assumed the role of Party branch secretary in Liangjiahe, he had more direct contact with you. How would you evaluate his work?

Bai Guangxing: After Xi Jinping assumed the role of Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe Brigade, the new leadership team displayed a renewed spirit and vigour. By the spring of 1974, a new phase of vigorous production had emerged. Xi Jinping understood the people's concerns and shared their urgent needs. Confronted with the scarcity of firewood and charcoal among farmers in this impoverished mountainous region, he focused on addressing the pressing issues of cooking fuel and lighting. Upon reading a newspaper report about rural areas in Miyang, Sichuan Province, using biogas for cooking and lighting, he actively proposed that the county send representatives to Sichuan to study biogas digester construction techniques. He himself participated in the county-organised study tour to Sichuan to learn about biogas development. Upon returning to his brigade, he mobilised and organised the villagers, establishing Shaanxi Province's first biogas village. To replicate Liangjiahe's success, the commune organised a biogas training course in the village, bringing together masons from all brigades. After completing the course, these masons returned to their respective brigades to construct biogas pits, sparking a widespread biogas boom across the entire commune. News of Liangjiahe's biogas initiative swiftly reached county, prefectural and provincial levels. In late July **1975**, the Shaanxi Provincial Science and Technology Bureau convened a provincial biogas utilisation promotion conference in Yanchuan County, with delegates visiting Liangjiahe to observe the biogas facilities.

Bai Guangxing: Joining the Party, promotion to cadre, and attending university were all outcomes of Xi Jinping's endeavours.

Xi Jinping himself was honoured as an advanced educated youth and a model of the "Learn from Dazhai" campaign at both county and prefectural levels.

Interview Team: It was also during your tenure as commune Party secretary that Xi Jinping was recommended for university admission. Could you elaborate on the circumstances at that time?

Bai Guangxing: While rectifying the leadership teams of the production brigades, the commune also undertook the task of strengthening and adjusting its own leadership. First, three young and capable comrades with outstanding achievements were selected from among commune cadres and stationed cadres to be recommended to higher authorities for approval as deputy leaders of the commune. We further planned to select one or two promising brigade secretaries with outstanding achievements on the production frontlines to join the commune leadership. At that time, the commune had identified Xi Jinping as the foremost candidate for this selection. Preparations were underway to submit his appointment as Deputy Secretary of the commune for higher-level approval. It was precisely at this juncture, in the autumn of 1975, that the county allocated two university recommendation quotas to Wen'anyi Commune. At that time, the commune had dozens of educated youth. Some openly requested the commune leadership to recommend them for university places. After comparative analysis, the commune concluded that Xi Jinping possessed theoretical knowledge, capability, outstanding achievements, and significant contributions. It therefore decided to prioritise his recommendation for university and submitted this to the county education department. The commune also dispatched officials to the county to assist Xi Jinping in completing his application form. On 16 September 1975, the Yancuan County admissions leadership meeting resolved to recommend Beijing-born educated youth Xi Jinping for admission to Tsinghua University. Thus, our commune Party committee accomplished three milestones for Xi Jinping: his admission to the Party, his promotion to cadre status, and his recommendation for university study.

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping left Liangjiahe for university in 1975, did you maintain contact with him?

Bai Guangxing: During his time in Wen'anyi Commune, Xi Jinping was an ordinary educated youth. His admission to the Party was based on meeting the criteria for Party membership, demonstrating commendable conduct, and fulfilling the necessary conditions. His appointment as branch secretary

Bai Guangxing: Joining the Party, promotion to cadre, and attending university were all outcomes of Xi Jinping's endeavours.

was due to his strong capabilities; and the commune's recommendation for university admission stemmed from his significant contributions. These were all outcomes of his own hard work and dedication, requiring no special favours from anyone. We merely fulfilled the duties incumbent upon grassroots Party committees and governments. Yet Xi Jinping himself never forgot these events. During his postings in Fujian and Zhejiang, he repeatedly inquired about and showed concern for my well-being. In 2009, when he visited Yan'an, he specifically sent greetings to me through an intermediary and presented me with a commemorative album marking the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, along with a set of first-day covers for safekeeping.

In November 2011, when my cousin returned from the United States to Beijing and visited Xi Jinping's home, Xi spoke of those who had shown him kindness during his time in Yancun – I was one of them. When my cousin relayed this story to me, I found myself deeply moved for a long time afterwards. On the one hand, I was profoundly impressed by Xi Jinping's personal integrity. That he should treat a minor act of kindness from years past with such profound gratitude, never forgetting it and repaying it so generously, was truly touching. On the other hand, these were simply duties I had fulfilled in the course of my work, and to receive such generous recognition for them felt undeserved.

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Interviewee: Yang Shizhong, born April 1951. Joined the Communist Party in December 1969. From April 1971 to October 1978, worked at Wen'anyi Commune, Yanchuan County, serving as armed forces specialist, Party committee member, and deputy director of the Revolutionary Committee. Subsequently held positions including secretary of the Yanchuan County Communist Youth League Committee, Secretary of the Political and Legal Affairs Committee, and President of the County Court; President of the Yan'an Intermediate People's Court; and Researcher at the departmental level at the Yan'an Intermediate People's Court. He retired in April 2011.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 29 December 2016

Location: Yang Shizhong's Office, Yan'an City, Shaanxi Province

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

Interview Team: Good day! During Xi Jinping's period of rural placement in Liangjiahe, you had frequent interactions with him at Wen'anyi Commune and formed a deep friendship. Could you describe how you first came to know Xi Jinping?

Yang Shizhong: I am from Jiajiaping in Yanchuan County, now known as Jiajiaping Town, formerly the Jiajiaping People's Commune. In April 1971, I was transferred to Wen'anyi Commune as a member of the Party Committee and specialist in armed forces. At that time, the commune had five officials serving as secretary and director. As a Party Committee member, I ranked behind them as the ~~sixth in command~~, still considered a minor commune leader. Comrade Liu Mingsheng, then ~~he~~ was stationed at Liangjiahe Brigade. It was through his introduction that I came to know Xi Jinping.

By the time I transferred to Wen'anyi, most of the educated youth had already left for work elsewhere. As far as I recall, only Xi Jinping and Lei Pingsheng remained from the Liangjiahe educated youth cohort. My initial impression of Xi Jinping was that this seventeen or eighteen-year-old lad seemed remarkably mature and steady. His speech, conduct, and approach to work and people were entirely adult-like, utterly unlike the restlessness and immaturity of some of his peers. Consequently, he made a very favourable first impression on me.

Being two years his senior, we felt an immediate kinship as contemporaries, finding common ground in conversation. Back then, when we young cadres visited the countryside, we'd seek out the educated youth for chats after finishing our tasks. Otherwise, the brigade cadres would either lodge us with unmarried old men in the village or send us to sleep at the animal keepers' quarters. Thus, whenever I visited Liangjiahe Brigade, I would chat with Xi Jinping and Lei Pingsheng. They were quite isolated in the village back then, often coming to the commune to discuss work or exchange idle talk. When mealtimes came around, we'd share a simple meal together. Commune cadres received thirty jin of grain and four liang of oil monthly, eating two meals a day: corn dumplings with stir-fried potato shreds for breakfast, and usually plain flour noodles for dinner. Whenever they arrived at the commune, Ming Sheng

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

or I would immediately serve them a portion of noodles. We would eat together and chat. Through these regular interactions, we gradually went from strangers to acquaintances, then from acquaintances to friends, spending five years together. I gained a fairly thorough understanding of his work and life in Liangjiahe at that time. To summarise: first, he studied diligently; second, he worked earnestly; third, he sought to advance; and fourth, he cared deeply for the people.

Interview Team: Could you elaborate on Xi Jinping's approach to learning?

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping was influenced by his revolutionary family background, but he also possessed a genuine interest in learning and a strong drive for self-improvement. He was particularly passionate about reading and studying. When I first went to Liangjiahe as part of the down-to-the-countryside movement, Xi Jinping was already living in a cave dwelling built with special state funding for educated youth. I noticed he possessed an extensive collection of books, scattered across his desk and the earthen bed. Conversing with him, it became evident that Xi Jinping was indeed well-read and possessed a broad knowledge base, which greatly inspired me.

Xi Jinping possessed a considerable library. Villagers recounted that upon his arrival from Beijing, he brought two heavy trunks brimming with books. Moreover, while other educated youths received parcels from home containing clothing or sweets, Xi's packages contained only books alongside a few garments. The collection was diverse and comprehensive, encompassing political and economic texts, philosophy, Chinese and foreign literary works, and weighty classical masterpieces. There were also reference books. Once when I visited him, I leafed through his Chinese dictionary—a thick volume bound in green leather. I remarked, "Blimey, this is a splendid book, very practical indeed!" Xi Jinping replied, "It's useful, take it." And so, Xi Jinping gave me a Chinese dictionary. I used that dictionary for many years, though sadly it was lost during a move in Yanchuan later on.

It was no mean feat for Xi Jinping to maintain such a studious attitude back then. He had to participate in labour every day, and

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

and later as village Party secretary he grew even busier. Yet no matter how arduous the labour, he always found time to read. He carried books with him when working in the fields, reading during breaks in production. At evening meals, he would eat while studying, mouth full yet eyes fixed on the pages. Few of his peers possessed such a dedicated spirit for learning. I was no different. Although I was already working at the time and enjoyed far better conditions for study and daily life than he did, I lacked Xi Jinping's admirable dedication to learning.

Interview Team: Could you describe Xi Jinping's work in Liangjiahe?

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping was not yet an adult, but he worked with remarkable diligence. When he was still an ordinary educated youth, we went to Liangjiahe for rural work. The villagers unanimously remarked: 'This young man is truly commendable. He works hard, is honest and dependable, never shirking his duties or cutting corners. He was quiet, never joking about trivial matters, and never swearing or getting into fights.' His character was so good that villagers of all ages liked to visit his cave dwelling to discuss work or share family news.

Whether serving as an ordinary educated youth, being seconded for social education work, or later as village Party secretary, Xi Jinping not only approached his duties with diligence and responsibility but also actively participated in collective labour. At that time, some village Party secretaries, wielding a modicum of authority, frequently used excuses of running errands here and there to evade work. But Xi Jinping never did such things. Unless there were major village affairs, he always reported for work on time and laboured alongside the members. He led by example in completing his monthly labour quota without fail.

Interview Team: As a member of the Party Committee at Wen'anyi Commune at the time, you must have considerable insight into Xi Jinping's journey to Party membership. Could you share your recollections of that period?

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping actively sought political **advancement**. He joined the Communist Youth League in **1973** and became a member of the Communist Party of China in January **1974**. At that time, there was no probationary period for Party membership; once approved, one became a full member immediately.

Many accounts of Xi Jinping's admission process circulate in society today, some lacking rigour and others untrue. As I was a direct participant with clear recollection of the entire process, it is necessary to clarify the facts as I know them.

At that time, Bai Guangxing, the Party Secretary of our commune, held relatively liberal views. For a period, Liangjiahe Brigade urgently needed a capable young person to serve as Party branch secretary and lead the commune members in accomplishing meaningful work. At that time, the incumbent brigade secretary, Liang Yuming, had served in a leadership role for some years and was advancing in age. Moreover, he voluntarily stepped aside, repeatedly recommending Xi Jinping to the commune Party committee for Party membership and the position of brigade secretary. It could be said that Liang Yuming's intentions coincided with ours. However, Xi Jinping was not yet a Party member. Consequently, the commune Party committee brought the matter of Xi Jinping's Party membership into focus, prioritising his cultivation. It should be noted that, at that time, the commune Party committee had already prepared to accept Xi Jinping into the Party.

During our commune Party committee's initial deliberations on Xi Jinping's admission to the Party, all members concurred that he had demonstrated commendable conduct and enjoyed high standing among the masses, thus meeting the criteria for membership. Unanimous approval was granted. However, out of prudence, it was deemed prudent to conduct ~~the~~ the matter of his father, Xi Zhongxun, who was then **'sent down'** to Luoyang. Accordingly, we tasked Wang Xueli, the commune's organisational officer, with contacting the relevant authorities to initiate this external inquiry. Before long, Luoyang responded with a letter circulated among all members of the commune Party committee. It stated: "The matter concerning Xi Zhongxun constitutes a contradiction among the people; his children's education and employment shall remain unaffected." Armed with this letter, the commune promptly convened a Party committee meeting to deliberate and approve Xi Jinping's Party membership, concurrently appointing him as Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe Production Brigade. Both his admission to the Party and his appointment as branch secretary were resolved at this single meeting. I recall that at the same meeting, the Liangjiahe Brigade also deliberated and approved the admission of two other Party members.

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

In those days, joining the Party was not a matter of personal connections. Xi Jinping's admission and appointment as village Party secretary were entirely due to his own proactive pursuit of progress, diligent work, and the support of the masses. At that time, he had no personal connections or favours to rely on. He was simply an ordinary Beijing educated youth who had travelled thousands of miles to this remote and impoverished area to join the rural settlement. Moreover, his father, Xi Zhongxun, was still suffering political persecution at the time **and** had not been "**rehabilitated**." This circumstance could only hinder his Party membership, offering him no advantage. Therefore, Xi Jinping's admission into the Party at that time was solely because he fully met the criteria for a Communist Party member and had repeatedly submitted applications for membership, actively seeking to advance. His appointment as village Party branch secretary was due to his hard work, his solid foundation among the masses, and the widespread support he enjoyed.

After assuming office, Xi Jinping not only worked diligently himself but also led the commune members in undertaking projects such as gully control, dam construction, afforestation, and the large-scale promotion of biogas production. All these initiatives were carried out with great vigour and received unanimous praise from the commune. The commune Party committee fully affirmed and was highly satisfied with the work of Liangjiahe Brigade.

At that time, I was stationed at Shangwen'anyi Brigade. Following the commune's unified arrangements, I led the members in promoting biogas production and achieved some results. Therefore, I was quite familiar with Xi Jinping's work on biogas. Xi Jinping was indeed a thoughtful individual, bold in both conception and execution. He personally funded a study tour to Mianyang, Sichuan, and upon his return, constructed the village's first biogas digester – also the county's inaugural such facility. This attracted the attention of the county biogas office and garnered support from provincial and prefectural authorities, who specifically convened an on-site meeting at Liangjiahe Brigade. By spearheading the biogas initiative in Liangjiahe, Xi not only resolved villagers' needs for lighting, cooking fuel and heating, but also harnessed biogas waste as an excellent fertiliser. This multi-benefit approach significantly boosted the economic development of Liangjiahe Brigade, improved living conditions for residents, and earned unanimous praise and commendation from leaders at all levels.

Interview Team: In what specific ways did Xi Jinping demonstrate his "concern for the people"?

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

Yang Shizhong: After leaving Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping continued to care deeply about the villagers here. Today, I will mainly discuss this through the following aspects.

In August 1986, after graduating from the Prefectural Party School, I was assigned to serve as Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Town. At that time, Xi Jinping was serving as Executive Vice Mayor of Xiamen City. In January 1987, I wrote a letter to Xi Jinping. My primary aim was to visit the economically advanced coastal city of Xiamen for study and observation, to broaden my horizons and liberate my thinking. Simultaneously, I hoped to utilise Xi Jinping's connections to explore export channels for Yanchuan County's red dates, Ganquan's red adzuki beans, and our township's deer antler products. This would help secure funding and stimulate local economic development. Crucially, I aimed to adopt innovative development strategies and practical working methodologies observed during the study tour to revitalise our township.

Xi Jinping promptly replied: "You mention wishing to visit Xiamen. Emotionally, I very much look forward to meeting you and warmly welcome your visit. However, certain matters require your understanding: the resources of a county-level entity seeking joint ventures in Xiamen are generally insufficient, particularly for large-scale economic cooperation, which presents greater challenges. To date, no prefecture-level city in Shaanxi has secured projects in Xiamen, owing to issues involving approval authority, foreign exchange, capital, transportation, and so forth..."

Upon receiving his reply, we were deeply grateful for Xi Jinping's earnest invitation and fully understood his candid, forthright approach as a friend. We also made thorough preparations, photographing the biogas digesters he had led villagers to build, the wells he had dug, and the dams he had constructed. That July, I led Liang Yuming, the village Party branch secretary, and Qiao Shenghui, the director of the supply and marketing cooperative, on a special study visit to Xiamen.

Having not seen each other for many years, Xi Jinping greeted us warmly and cordially upon our arrival in Xiamen. He was particularly delighted and appreciative upon seeing the photographs. We then discussed the jujube issue in detail. Under the prevailing conditions, transporting jujubes to Xiamen was indeed impractical, with high costs for preservation and transportation. Such a large-scale economic collaboration had no precedent. Xi Jinping's assessment was entirely realistic.

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

Regarding the deer antler venture, Xi Jinping remained supportive. He arranged for several businessmen to visit, but upon learning our operation comprised merely thirty to forty deer, they deemed the prospects unpromising and declined investment. This proved highly instructive, driving home the lesson that "without scale, there is no **profit**" Our visit also served another purpose:

at that time, Liangjiahe Village lacked electricity, relying on kerosene lamps for light. This stifled development, and we hoped Xi Jinping could help secure funding for electricity. He subsequently wrote a letter to Bai Chonggui, then Party Secretary of Yanchuan County. This drew the attention and commitment of the county Party committee and government, which allocated a special fund of 100,000 yuan to resolve Liangjiahe's electricity issue. The villagers of Liangjiahe Valley remain profoundly grateful and remember this act fondly.

During our stay in Xiamen, Xi worked at his office by day and dined with us on multiple evenings. When we departed, he personally purchased plane tickets for the three of us. On the day of our flight, torrential rain poured down. Xi braved the downpour to see us off at the airport, only returning after personally confirming we had boarded the aircraft. This gesture deeply moved us.

On 13 November 2009, Xi Jinping conducted research in Yan'an, and I attended the meeting. After reports from Party secretaries at municipal, county, township, and village levels, he directly called my name: "Shizhong, you speak." As President of Yanchang County People's Court at the time, I impromptu addressed three issues concerning the basic situation, achievements, and existing problems of the municipal and county-level People's Courts in Yan'an. Particularly after I addressed the widespread issues within the People's Courts at that time – the lack of succession in the judiciary, severe shortages in case handling funds, and difficulties in enforcement – Xi Jinping paid close attention and took notes. Shortly afterwards, the Supreme People's Court sent out a survey form, and the identified problems were swiftly addressed and resolved.

During that research meeting, Xi Jinping recalled before the assembled attendees: In 1973, while applying for Party membership at Wen'anyi, some "damaging materials" had been sent from Beijing. At that time, it was Ming Sheng and Shizhong who tore up those materials," enabling him to join the Party without hindrance.

Yang Shizhong: Xi Jinping became village Party secretary precisely because everyone supported him.

After the meeting concluded, Xi Jinping shook hands with each attendee at the door and posed for photographs. As I was the last to leave the conference room, he said to me "Shizhong, you're the only one knowKeep up the good work!" I replied."Right!"

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Xi Jinping, born November 1949; Lei Pingsheng, born August 1951. The brothers were fellow students of Xi Jinping at Beijing Bayi School. On 13 January 1969, they joined Xi Jinping in being sent down to the Wen'anyi Commune in Yanchuan County. Lei Rongsheng was assigned to Liangjiata Village. He entered university in September 1973 and subsequently worked at the Yan'an Regional Radio Administration, Beijing Agricultural University, and the National Academy of Governance, retiring in June 2010. Lei Pingsheng was assigned to Liangjiahe Village, sharing the same cave dwelling with Xi Jinping. He enrolled at Yan'an University in October 1974. After graduating in 1977, he worked at the Nutrition Research Institute under the Beijing Municipal Science and Technology Commission. From 1983 to 1995, he studied and worked in Switzerland, France, and the United States, obtaining a Doctor of Science degree from France. He is currently a Research Fellow and Doctoral Supervisor at the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 13 January 2017

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Lei Rongsheng, Lei Pingsheng: Xi Jinping regards himself as part of the yellow earth

Interview Team: Professor Rongsheng, Professor Pingsheng, good day! We understand the significance of your choosing today for this interview, as it marks the 48th anniversary of your departure from Beijing to the northern Shaanxi countryside alongside Xi Jinping.

Lei Pingsheng: Indeed it is. This is a day that will forever remain unforgettable, not only for us but also for the Beijing educated youth who departed on the same train. I believe this date is etched in their memories, for it marked a turning point in our lives.

Time flies like a white horse passing through a crack. When Mao Zedong revisited Jinggangshan in 1965, he reflected in verse: "Thirty-eight years have passed, in the blink of an eye." For us, it has been forty-eight years! While we dare not claim it has been "in the blink of an eye," recalling those scenes feels as though it were yesterday.

Interview Team: Please begin by recounting the initial reasons for your rural placement and the circumstances of your departure.

Lei Pingsheng: On 13 January 1969, over twenty students from our Bayi School, laden with our belongings, boarded a special train alongside educated youth from other Beijing schools bound for the rural areas of Yan'an in northern Shaanxi. Thus began our arduous journey to the countryside.

When processing our paperwork to join the commune in Yanchuan County, Shaanxi at the end of 1968, regulations required us to first submit an application to our school. We then had to take the school's certification to the police station in our family's place of residence to cancel our Beijing household registration. Only then could we return to school and, upon presenting the cancellation certificate, collect several dozen yuan in relocation allowance issued by the Beijing Revolutionary Committee. This money did not reach us in full. As some of the educated youths travelling with our school came from financially strained families, the school's Revolutionary Committee withheld a portion of the funds to collectively purchase provisions for them. At that time, regulations permitted educated youths to purchase a wooden chest with ration coupons to store personal belongings and clothing.

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clothing. While domestic goods were scarce, wooden trunks were readily available in many parts of Beijing, costing between 18 and 22 yuan each. These trunks bore Mao Zedong's portrait alongside slogans such as "Sailing the seas relies on the **helmsman**" and "Knowledge youth to the countryside".

By actual age, Xi Jinping was not yet 16 that year and had not reached the age for being sent to the countryside

. He was born in June 1953. Most of us in the Class of '67 were born in 1951. Xi Jinping was two years younger than me, but having started school a year earlier, he was only one year below me in junior secondary school, belonging to the Class of '68.

When I was processing my departure from Beijing, I encountered Xi Jinping. At the time, I went to the office of the Revolutionary Committee's Task Force at the Bayi School to submit my proof of household registration cancellation. Teacher Qi Rongxian, the person in charge, promptly completed all my formalities. Just then, Xi Jinping walked in, stating he too wished to register for the Down to the Countryside Movement. Teacher Qi Rongxian appeared somewhat taken aback and asked "Xi Jinping, why are you leaving too?" Xi Jinping replied that he wished to go. Mr Qi remarked "But you're not yet of age to join the rural teams. You ought to wait until next year, when there may be quotas for remaining in Beijing as a worker." At that time, everyone knew that staying in Beijing offered far better living conditions than joining the rural teams in the impoverished northern Shaanxi countryside. Had Xi Jinping delayed his departure until the following year, he would likely have secured a position in the capital. Teacher Qi cared deeply for Xi Jinping, who had been an exemplary student throughout his schooling. As his form teacher, she understood him and his family circumstances intimately, hoping for a better placement for him. Yet Xi Jinping remained resolute in his decision to leave Beijing. Teacher Qi then said to me "Lei Pingsheng, once you've completed the paperwork, you may leave." She kept Xi Jinping behind to continue persuading him to stay.

I waited outside the office. After about ten minutes, Xi Jinping emerged. He told me Teacher Qi still wished him to stay, but he was determined to go to Yancun County to join the rural work brigade. Xi Jinping said to me "Once we reach Yancun in Shaanxi, shall we be assigned to the same production brigade?" I replied "Certainly" And

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a simple verbal agreement led to our shared years of rural placement in Liangjiahe Production Brigade, Yancun County.

My elder brother, Lei Rongsheng, had originally hoped to be assigned to the same production brigade as us. However, the military representative who escorted us to Yanchuan County reviewed the list of educated youth assignments and deemed this arrangement unsuitable. He believed that concentrating too many of these "children who could be properly educated" within a single production brigade was inadvisable, and that dispersing them would be preferable. Consequently, Lei Rongsheng was reassigned to another production brigade.

On the day of departure, my brother and I carried our modest luggage to Beijing Railway Station ourselves, without family seeing us off. Xi Jinping also arrived alone, expecting no family presence. He boarded the train directly and sat with us. Then a classmate called out: "Xi Jinping, your sister's here to see you off!" We saw it was Xi Jinping's elder sister, Qiaoqiao. The station was teeming with people—those seeing off and those being seen off—amidst a cacophony of noise. Xi Jinping stood inside the carriage while his elder sister Qiaoqiao gazed at him through the window from below. In that moment, the siblings must have been overwhelmed with mixed emotions; the pain of parting was palpable. Qiaoqiao handed him a bag of fruit, urging him to take care on his journey, settle well in his new surroundings, and look after himself. Xi Jinping nodded in agreement, saying little. Standing in the carriage, he shed no tears, but gazed intently at his sister for a long while. Decades later, when Sister Qiaoqiao recounted that scene to me, Xi Jinping's movements and expression on the train remain vivid in her memory.

We travelled by train to Tongchuan in Shaanxi, stayed overnight, then transferred to trucks heading for Yan'an. Upon arrival in Yan'an, we lodged at the Yan'an Normal School for one night. We slept in classrooms, where desks were arranged into large platforms. We spread out our bedding and slept upon them.

Early on the morning of 16 January, we departed Yan'an by vehicle, passing through Yanchuan before reaching Wen'anyi Commune around noon. In the open field outside the commune, poor peasants and lower-middle peasants from various villages who had come to greet the educated youth held a brief welcome ceremony for us

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and treated us to a meal. That day, the people of Northern Shaanxi offered us their finest fare: potatoes, carrots, glass noodles, pork, and millet rice. The educated youths scattered to eat, while villagers watched us from a distance. Dogs darted among the diners, scavenging scraps of fatty meat that had fallen to the ground. After the meal, we dispersed according to our assigned teams to reach our respective placement locations. Xi Jinping and I were assigned to Liangjiahe Brigade, some 15 li from the commune headquarters. As our group descended into the valley, the villagers kindly assisted us, shouldering our luggage so we carried only our shoulder bags and satchels.

Upon reaching Liangjiahe, Lei Rongsheng and his group needed to proceed further and parted ways with us. Fortunately, we were still within the same valley, and their destination lay only a few more miles ahead, not far distant. **Lei Rongsheng:** The village where I was sent down was called Liangjiata - Before the Cultural Revolution, it belonged to the same production brigade as Liangjiahe production brigade, comprising two natural villages. This village lay behind Liangjiahe and was rather remote.

Lei Pingsheng: Xi Jinping and I were assigned to the rear brigade of Liangjiahe Production Brigade, alongside Wang Yansheng, Yang Jingsheng, Tong Daning, and Dai Ming. From that point, Xi spent seven years here, while I spent six. Life back then was arduous in every respect. We worked and studied together, frequently exchanged ideas, and always maintained an exceptionally harmonious relationship.

Interview Team: As children of senior officials, the sudden transition from city life to rural village must have caused considerable psychological adjustment. In 2002, Xi Jinping published his memoir "I Am a Son of the Yellow Earth," recounting overcoming "four major hurdles" during those years: fleas, diet, labour, and ideology. Could you share how you navigated these challenges?

Lei Pingsheng: I read that article later. The mention of the "four major hurdles" evokes some rather comical scenes that still make me chuckle to this day.

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Indeed, the sudden transition from the bustling capital to the mountain valleys of the Loess Plateau proved psychologically jarring. Though we urban-raised youths had undergone military training and rural labour in the early sixties, even our participation in the "**"Three Summers"**" and "Double Rush" agricultural campaigns had been orchestrated by schools, selecting well-off rural production teams for brief stints. Consequently, our understanding of the countryside remained entirely book-learned. In January 1969, as we travelled by coach towards northern Shaanxi, we were stunned by the endless expanse of barren, yellow loess slopes along the way. All we could see **were** "remote, impoverished mountain **regions**." We found it impossible to reconcile the scene before us with the revolutionary holy land or our own futures. Some fellow passengers even questioned whether the driver had taken a wrong turn. Upon arriving at the commune and production teams, witnessing the farmers' astonishing poverty, I was astonished: "How could such impoverished regions and peasants still exist over a decade after the founding of New China?" At that moment, I felt profoundly bewildered and disheartened.

Navigating the "four trials" of rural life proved exceptionally arduous. Take the "flea trial"—a hardship every educated youth who served in northern Shaanxi () experienced firsthand. Within days of arriving at the production brigade, several of us developed inexplicable, large, red, intensely itchy swellings on our bodies. Unaware of their cause, we had no means of relief. Only later did we gradually realise they were caused by flea bites. Subsequently, we heard numerous remedies, both useful and otherwise, such as "not allowing pigs, dogs, or other livestock back into the cave dwellings" and "drinking water boiled with local loess (to address so-called 'water and soil incompatibility')". We also purchased a large sack of '**DDD**' powder from Wen'anyi, scattering it liberally beneath our kang mattresses to repel the fleas, though with little success. Although Xi Jinping's constitution was somewhat sturdier, his reaction remained severe. The swellings on his body were large and crimson, and with the blood from scratching and the oozing pus from infections, they looked quite alarming. To endure the "flea ordeal" as swiftly as possible, we devised several countermeasures. First, we maintained scrupulous cleanliness of both indoor and outdoor surfaces, sweeping and sprinkling water as frequently as feasible to remove loose dust from the cave floor, thereby minimising

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the likelihood of flea infestation. Additionally, before entering the cave dwelling or climbing onto the kang, we would shake out our trouser legs to dislodge any stray fleas that had jumped onto us. When inside the cave, we would try to stay off the ground as much as possible to minimise the chance of fleas jumping onto our legs from the floor. If you had visited our cave dwelling back then, you'd often have found Xi Jinping, myself, and Lei Rongsheng in the comical posture of 'squatting' (a Shaanxi dialect term) on our respective stools with trouser legs rolled up, chatting away. We reasoned that no matter how high the fleas jumped, they couldn't possibly leap from the floor onto the stools. If Liang Yuming entered the cave dwelling then, he would deliberately shake his trouser legs, claiming he'd brought in a fair number of "fleas," which would make us all roar with laughter. This situation persisted for over a year. The final solution came when we moved into new cave dwellings built by the brigade for the educated youth. There, fewer pigs, dogs, and other livestock roamed about, and our own adaptability had also improved.

As for the "dietary challenge," it mainly involved coarse grains prepared without refinement, compounded by a lack of ~~leaving~~ one perpetually feeling hollow inside. Vegetables were scarce; we essentially ate whatever was available. Back then, the policy prioritised grain production, leaving little room for other vegetables. Potatoes and carrots were staples, but poor storage meant many rotted or froze, failing to guarantee sufficient supply. The peasants' staple vegetable was pickled cabbage. They would typically prepare two or three vats of pickled cabbage after the autumn harvest, using Chinese cabbage, carrots, and green tomatoes. These pickling vats were stored in the cave dwellings, filling the air with the distinctive scent of fermented vegetables. Being rather lazy, we used the excuse **of 'hot knowing how to pickle'** to avoid the task, thus going without. Occasionally, we would ask fellow villagers we were on good terms with, such as Wu Tiesuo or Xue Yubin, for a bit of pickled cabbage. The villagers in the rear section of Liangjiahe were very sympathetic and understanding towards us educated youths, never refusing to "dig out" a bowl of pickled cabbage for us. The most memorable occasion occurred in April or May 1970. Having endured months without fresh vegetables, our throats **felt parched and dry**. Coincidentally, our landlord Zhang Mayou's family was emptying last year's pickles from their crocks to clean them, preparing to pickle fresh vegetables for autumn and winter. Zhang Mayou's wife came to ask if we wanted the discarded pickles and brought us a large basinful.

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and Heping thanked her and immediately began grabbing handfuls of pickled cabbage to devour, only stopping when the entire basin was emptied. Only then did we breathe a satisfied sigh.

Another hardship was the scarcity of cooking oil. Without oil, staple foods were consumed in excessive quantities. The lack of oil also led to numerous amusing incidents. Xi Jinping recounted an anecdote about "eating raw meat," which many have asked me to verify. I can confirm its authenticity, as I was a witness to the event. In December 1972, Li Qinglin, a primary school teacher from Putian, Fujian, wrote to Mao Zedong detailing the difficulties faced by educated youth.

In April 1973, Mao Zedong replied to Li Qinglin, enclosing 300 yuan in remittances 'to help make ends meet'. In the latter half of 1973, the Revolutionary Committee of the Yan'an region decided to grant each educated youth still labouring in production teams 200 yuan in subsidies. Thus, Xi Jinping and I each received

400 yuan in living allowances. With these subsidies, our straitened circumstances eased somewhat. During the Spring Festival of 1974, we enjoyed a bountiful celebration, purchasing several dozen jin of pork. The meat we bought then was of excellent quality, appearing as neatly and beautifully carved as jade. That day we made dumplings. As we prepared to boil them, Xi Jinping shared a humorous anecdote from the novel *The Fire-Sower* by writer Liang Bin. One protagonist, Yun Tao, expressed his wish to wrap several pounds of pork into a single giant dumpling, imagining that with one bite, a 'calf might emerge.' We chuckled, recalling how abroad there exists ~~real~~ sliced paper-thin for raw consumption. Given the superb quality of this pork, perhaps it too could be eaten uncooked. Amidst our laughter, we actually tried carefully slicing a piece of the slightly frozen lean meat with a knife, taking turns to dip thin slices into soy sauce paste. Having gone hungry for so long, with no oil or fat in our stomachs, we actually polished off that entire slice of raw lean pork. Once the raw meat was gone, the dumplings we'd spent two or three hours wrapping were devoured in a mere twenty minutes, swept away like a whirlwind.

Regarding the "labour test," to be honest, our enthusiasm for work wasn't particularly high when we first arrived at the production brigade.

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wasn't particularly high. Firstly, we hadn't yet developed a habit of labour and weren't accustomed to such strenuous work; secondly, the initial work points allocated to us were a mere 6.5 points per day. Back then, a strong labourer in the brigade

earned 10 points per day. Yet the educated youth's points were worth less than a woman's. If we didn't go out to work in the morning (except for early shifts), we could only earn 5.2 points. It was understood that the previous year (1968), one point (**10 points**) was worth only one jiao and one fen. In other words, the 5.2 points we earned for a day's labour were worth only 5.7 fen. A yearly quota of 1,200 points would cover the annual grain subsidy, amounting to merely thirteen or fourteen yuan. Consequently, labour motivation remained low during that period. Naturally, as time passed, Xi Jinping's perspective evolved. Through increased interaction with local villagers and growing accustomed to the work, he cultivated a spirit of diligence and endurance, eventually earning **10** points per day.

I interview Team: Xi Jinping once mentioned that upon first arriving in Liangjiahe, he was young and had been sent there by circumstances. Lacking a long-term perspective, he neglected the importance of unity, resulting in "the villagers having a poor impression of me." Later, through the guidance of his aunt and uncle, he made efforts to integrate with the masses. After a year, "the villagers saw a change in me and began to treat me **better**." This experience profoundly influenced Xi Jinping's development. Could you share your insights on this matter?

Lei Pingsheng: To be honest, I never sensed that the villagers of Liangjiahe held a particularly poor impression of Xi Jinping. One incident, however, remains vivid in my memory. It occurred during our first month in the countryside, when Xi Jinping and I visited another brigade within Wen'anyi Commune for recreation. That brigade also housed fellow students from our Bayi School. Shortly after arriving, we received an urgent notice from the commune summoning all educated youths and militia cadres to an assembly. Given the tight deadline, we joined the group from that brigade and set off on foot towards the commune headquarters, led by Secretary Song of their Party branch carrying the red flag. As we neared the assembly site, across the river,

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Upon seeing the Liangjiahe contingent emerging from the valley to meet us head-on, we left our original group and crossed the dry riverbed to join them. Unexpectedly, upon reaching the commune meeting ground, we encountered the clamour of "Xi Zhongxun's son refuses to follow the red flag." This made it clear that due to his family background and lofty aspirations, Xi Jinping had already drawn the attention of certain individuals. This incident was minor, yet it spread swiftly and widely. Farmers from other villages, unaware of the circumstances, sought explanations from Liangjiahe villagers. Even commune cadres took notice and inquired about Xi Jinping, the educated youth. To their surprise, the villagers unanimously declared him a "**fine lad**" and "a good one" This consensus allowed the commotion to dissipate without consequence. When Xi Jinping later spoke of the people of northern Shaanxi sheltering, caring for, and protecting him, he was speaking from factual experience.

Similar incidents occurred repeatedly thereafter. Whenever matters arose concerning recruitment, enrolment, or admission to the Communist Youth League or Communist Party, individuals would frequently "report circumstances" to higher authorities. These reports invariably centred on whether the person in question was "a child who could be properly educated." Such groundless criticism and "special treatment" were commonplace in that era. As one friend remarked: "Others started from zero; Xi Jinping had to start from negative figures."

Interview Team: Xi Jinping's seven years in Liangjiahe coincided with the crucial period of his transition from adolescence to young adulthood, when his worldview, outlook on life, and values were taking shape. In your view, did Xi Jinping undergo any discernible ideological shifts during this process?

Lei Pingsheng: During Xi Jinping's seven years in the countryside, there were indeed some shifts in his thinking, though it's difficult to pinpoint distinct phases. My personal impression is that from January 1969 until that autumn, he remained

still an inexperienced youth. From early 1970 until his return to Beijing in 1972, when he was granted permission by the Central Special Case Office to visit his father, Comrade Xi, who was under isolation and investigation, his emotions and thoughts entered a period of steady

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steady upward trajectory of rigorous self-discipline. He had grown more composed and self-assured in his conduct, and considerably more open-minded. It was likely from the latter half of 1973 onwards, particularly after joining the "reorganisation" work at the Zhaojiahe Brigade of Fengjiaping Commune in Yanchuan County, that his thinking entered a period of marked transformation. During this phase, he lived up to expectations by shouldering heavy responsibilities, actively participating in rural production, and leading farmers in their efforts to transform their livelihoods and working conditions. If one must speak of a "transformation" during this period, I believe Zhao Tingbi, Secretary of Fengjiaping Commune, played a significant "catalytic" role in this shift. Additionally, Bai Guangxing, Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune, Liu Mingsheng, a commune cadre, and Liang Yuming, Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Brigade, each contributed in their own ways.

In the latter half of 1973, encouraged by Tao Haisu—Secretary of the Yanchuan County Communist Youth League Committee and an educated youth from Beijing—Xi Jinping participated in **the 'reorganisation'** of the Zhaojiahe Brigade within Fengjiaping Commune, Yanchuan County, in his capacity as a League member. Xi Jinping cherished this opportunity, working diligently with genuine dedication. His efforts earned him widespread praise from the Zhaojiakou villagers and also caught the attention of Zhao Tingbi, Secretary of Fengjiaping Commune. As Xi later recounted to me during casual chats upon his return to the brigade, Secretary Zhao had several heart-to-heart talks with him, adopting a warm and affable manner while encouraging him to free his thinking and work with confidence. I believe this Secretary Zhao was exceptionally skilled at ideological work and valued talent. To help Xi Jinping shed his mental burdens, Secretary Zhao specifically recounted what he knew of Comrade Xi's revolutionary experiences and achievements in northern Shaanxi during their talks. He spoke of the deep affection and respect the local populace held for Comrade Xi, while also conveying the expectations the masses and the organisation placed upon Xi Jinping. These conversations provided Xi Jinping with political trust and encouragement. During those days, I sensed that Xi Jinping had been thoroughly liberated from the anxieties and frustrations that had weighed upon him for years. Secretary Zhao Tingbi not only engaged Xi Jinping in dialogue but also took concrete action. Upon learning that Xi Jinping's repeated applications for Party membership at Wen'anyi Commune had been rejected by the county authorities, Secretary Zhao approached Bai Guangxing, the Party Secretary of Wen'anyi Commune, to discuss transferring Xi Jinping to the Zhaojiakou Brigade of Fengjiaping Commune for settlement and cultivation towards Party membership. Secretary Bai of Wen'anyi Commune firmly refused to release him, stating that this was Wen

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An'yi Commune's 'own talent, to be utilised by us', and that 'Wen'an'yi would independently consider cultivating and resolving Xi Jinping's organisational affiliation'.

From this point onward, Xi Jinping abandoned all hesitation and uncertainty, throwing himself wholeheartedly into serving the masses with unwavering conviction. By this stage, his thinking had gradually crystallised around new life objectives. This is my personal perception.

Interview Team: Xi Jinping's profound affection for grassroots communities stands as a defining characteristic. Could you share some anecdotes from your experiences illustrating this trait?

Lei Pingsheng: Certainly. Let me recount an incident shortly after our arrival at Liangjiahe's rear village. Initially, we resided in the cave dwellings of farmer Zhang Mayou and his son Zhang Qingyuan. Meals were taken at Zhang Guilin's cave dwelling, situated thirty metres away on the adjacent slope. **Zhang Guilin, a venerable veteran Party member, had been a member since 1936.**

Zhang Guilin was a highly respected veteran Party member who had served as Liangjiahe Village Party Branch Secretary from 1936

1960. By the time we arrived in the village, he was already quite advanced in years. To free up one cave dwelling for us educated youths to cook and eat in, he moved his entire family—his wife (whom we called Old Gao in the Shaanxi dialect), his daughter, and his elderly mother—to another cave dwelling nearby. After we had eaten meals at their home for several days, Zhang Guilin's elderly mother passed away due to old age. The family needed to arrange the funeral, but with nowhere to lay the body, it had to be temporarily placed in the cave dwelling where we cooked. Consequently, we had to relocate elsewhere to prepare our meals.

It was just before the Spring Festival. The Beijing educated youths had only recently arrived and hadn't yet begun formal labour, so life was relatively unhurried. One morning, as we emerged from our cave dwelling, Xi Jinping said to me "Let's go up and have a look." We strolled over to Zhang Guilin's courtyard.

Just then, Old Mrs Gao emerged from her cave dwelling, somewhat surprised by our arrival. Xi Jinping, mindful of local taboos, addressed her cautiously "**W**eard your elderly relative passed away. **M**"

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May we go in to pay our respects?" Old Mrs Gao replied readily "You may."

This departed elder ~~Her~~ son's revolutionary activities since the "Red Uprising" in northern Shaanxi during the 1930s, proving herself a profoundly principled revolutionary mother. We had recently learned these details from Zhang Guiliu, the rear brigade captain of the village and Zhang Guilin's cousin. Upon entering the cave dwelling, Xi Jinping bowed respectfully several times before the body of the elderly woman lying on the heated platform bed. Witnessing this scene, I was deeply moved by Xi Jinping's genuine affection for the revolutionary forebears. Later, when Zhang Guilin learned during conversation that the educated youth opposite him was the son of Xi Zhongxun, former Chairman of the Shaanxi-Gansu Revolutionary Base Area, he murmured in astonishment "Xi Zhongxun? He was destined to be among the great figures of our time!" *

Interview Team: How long after your arrival in Liangjiahe did this occur?

Lei Pingsheng: It was only a few days after our arrival in Liangjiahe. Xi Jinping's act of paying respectful condolences and bowing to the mother of a deceased rural elder and veteran Party member was something ordinary people at that time could scarcely have imagined, let alone done. It was the fourth year of the Cultural Revolution, when many traditions were being destroyed as part of the 'Four Olds' or deemed '**feudal and backward**'. But Xi Jinping did not share that view. He did this entirely out of respect for the mother of an old Communist Party member from the 1930s. It was a genuine expression of feeling. From this incident, I sensed that Xi Jinping had genuine affection for the masses and Party members.

Another minor incident occurred some time after our arrival in Liangjiahe. By then, we had begun working in the brigade's infrastructure construction team. This team undertook agricultural infrastructure projects such as constructing silt-trapping dams. The team leader, Wu Yuhua, was a quintessential Shaanbei man – strong and capable. At that time, his wife and child were also labouring alongside him in the construction team. His son was named ~~Wu~~. Yet, his speech and actions were not entirely clear.

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Wa," a lovely name, though he had a slight intellectual disability. Lingwa worked quite well, managing half a man's labour. His family brought him along to earn half pay, five or six fen. Yet his speech and actions weren't entirely clear; locally, he was called "**half-witted**." Lingwa also liked to stir trouble, often acting recklessly—grabbing, twisting, pushing others, or making crude jokes. He often speaks without considering the consequences, causing trouble. Many villagers frequently tease him, making him look foolish. Some grow so annoyed they clash with him – minor altercations involve a few choice words, while more serious ones escalate to physical confrontations. This happens especially when Lingwa's mother isn't present; certain individuals take advantage to twist his arm, slap him, or hurl insults. Such incidents are not uncommon. Whenever Lingwa's mother discovered he'd been bullied, she'd feel both heartbroken and furious. "Who picked on you?" she'd ask. Sometimes he could explain clearly, other times not. His mother was beside herself with anger over the constant disputes and unpleasantness Lingwa caused.

After we educated youth arrived at the construction brigade, both Wu Yuhua and Lingwa's mother grew concerned, fearing Lingwa might clash with the educated youth. After all, these were young men from the big cities; if Lingwa provoked a fight, the consequences of injury would be unbearable. Their anxiety intensified when they learned Xi Jinping was the son of a high-ranking official. Whenever we arrived at the work site, Lingwa's mother would cling tightly to him, preventing him from speaking or moving freely, fearful he might cause trouble. To Wu Yuhua and Lingwa's mother's surprise, throughout his time labouring with the construction team, Xi Jinping remained consistently gentle with Lingwa. Not only did no conflicts arise, but he always treated the child with a warm smile.

At that time, most male educated youths smoked. During breaks in the labour, when Xi Jinping sat on the earthen embankment rolling a cigarette, Lingwa would often snatch it away. He would simply laugh it off, never once speaking harshly to Lingwa. We educated youths and the local construction team members witnessed these interactions. Wu Yuhua and Lingwa's mother were deeply moved, for scarcely anyone had ever shown such tolerance and kindness towards their child before. Lingwa had joined the construction team expecting trouble – expecting to provoke him, to stir up incidents, to cause mischief. Yet with Xi Jinping present, Lingwa found himself free from bullying, far more at ease and content.

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We had expected Lingwa to provoke him, causing trouble or getting into mischief. Yet, with Xi Jinping present, Lingwa was no longer bullied and became much more cheerful and at ease.

Several years later, when Xi Jinping was recommended by the masses and selected by the organisation to attend university in Beijing, he bid farewell to everyone before his departure. Wu Yuhua and Lingwa's mother wept most bitterly. They had worked alongside Xi Jinping, helping one another, and he had been very kind to their son Lingwa. This couple from northern Shaanxi were deeply sentimental; at that moment, they felt as though a close relative of their own was setting off on a long journey. In 1993, when Xi Jinping returned to Liangjiahe from Fujian for the first time to visit his fellow villagers, both Wu Yuhua and Lingwa's mother had passed away, and Lingwa had been sent to a local orphanage. During that visit, Xi specifically inquired about Lingwa: "What has become of Lingwa? How is he faring?" According to our friend Wu Hui (also Wu Yuhua's nephew), who relayed this to me: upon learning of Lingwa's whereabouts, Xi Jinping sighed deeply with emotion. He ultimately left some money, entrusting the villagers to deliver it to him.

Xi Jinping is a man of profound kindness. In the words of the people of Northern Shaanxi, he is truly 'benevolent and righteous'. During his time in Liangjiahe, he showed genuine compassion and sincere care towards the poor peasants and lower-middle peasants, the elderly, children, and disabled youngsters. As an educated youth from Beijing who had come from outside the area, he left a particularly deep impression on the villagers.

Interview Team: We recently interviewed Zhang Weipang, who mentioned that he lived very close to you and helped you move house twice?

Lei Pingsheng: Indeed. A few months after our arrival in Liangjiahe, Zhang Guilin's daughter "Hong'er" welcomed a son-in-law named Zhang Weipang. Given their proximity, Xi Jinping developed an excellent rapport with him. When Xi moved from Zhang Qingyuan and Liu Jinlian's home to the educated youth cave dwellings, he had to carry his luggage and household items piece by piece to the new cave. During the move, I noticed Zhang Weipang sitting on a

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stone, smiling. I asked him, "Zhang Weipang, what are you smiling about?" He replied cheerfully, "Look! Xinping gave this to me!" I saw Zhang Weipang holding a sewing kit embroidered with the words "Mother's Heart". I knew this was the sewing kit Aunt Qi Xin, Xi Jinping's mother, had given him when he left Beijing for the countryside. Later, Zhang Weipang handed this meaningful sewing kit over to the archives bureau.

Later, whenever Xi Jinping returned to the village to visit his fellow villagers and saw Zhang Weipang, he would always exchange a few jovial remarks with him. Nowadays, Zhang Weipang grows apples, and the quality is quite excellent. On the eve of the 2015 Spring Festival, Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan returned to Liangjiahe to visit the villagers. They encountered Zhang Weipang and asked him how much income he earned annually from apple cultivation. At that time, the village still practised scattered apple cultivation by individual households, lacking any economies of scale. In his first year of apple production, Zhang Weipang earned tens of thousands of yuan. In a rural area like northern Shaanxi with relatively poor natural conditions, this was already a respectable income. So Xi Jinping exclaimed happily, "Zhang Weipang, you've struck it rich!" On that occasion, Xi Jinping also insisted on personally visiting Zhang Weipang's orchard on the plateau.

Inspired by the General Secretary's concern, in 2016, the nearly 70-year-old Zhang Weipang organised 27 neighbouring farming households to establish an apple cooperative. They also launched an apple brand called "Liangjiahe Plateau Apples". These green, eco-friendly, pure natural premium apples—grown without chemical fertilisers or pesticides—yielded 200–300 tonnes in 2016. Zhang Weipang himself harvested nearly 50,000 jin of top-quality apples

, earning over 200,000 yuan that year. This demonstrates how the villagers of Liangjiahe, through their diligence and hard work, are gradually becoming more prosperous. Indeed, enabling the people to live a good life is precisely the goal of Xi Jinping's work and endeavours.

Beyond the dam-building and terraced field construction undertaken by the infrastructure team, our labour as educated youth primarily involved mountain farming during peak agricultural seasons to produce grain—a far more arduous task. Each day, we rose at four or five in the morning, while it was still dark,

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dark, we had to rise and set off. One person had to stay behind to prepare the day's meals. These consisted of steamed corn dumplings, sorghum dumplings, and a pot of rice porridge; all carried up the mountain to feed the educated youth working there at breakfast and lunch.

Our food rations as educated youths were somewhat more generous than those of rural commune members. This was because when Premier Zhou Enlai heard that educated youths in northern Shaanxi were going hungry and not getting enough to eat, he discussed the matter with Shaanxi Province and the Yan'an region and decided to allocate each educated youth the rations of "one and a half persons". Moreover, during the first six months after our arrival in the countryside, the state also supplied us with six months' worth of grain from the national granaries. Consequently, our food rations were generally sufficient, and we ate rather better than others. We could eat steamed corn dumplings and sorghum dumplings, while the local villagers could only eat bran cakes. These bran cakes, also called "bran dumplings" by the locals, were made from the bran or corn husks left over after grinding. The dumplings were brownish-red and rather coarse, so much so that it was difficult to shape them into a cohesive mass.

Whilst dining on the mountain, the corn dumplings we educated youth ate were a golden yellow. The villagers saw them and remarked: "This is proper food you educated youth are eating." Xi Jinping picked up the villagers' bran dumplings and saw they were indeed far inferior. So he swapped his corn dumplings for the villagers' food. The villagers labouring alongside him praised him, saying: "Xi

Jinping is willing to endure hardship; he doesn't fuss over his food (一没, Shaanxi dialect, meaning 'not at all' or 'not in the slightest')". This phrase implies someone isn't picky and can endure hardship.

"**Not fussing** over food" means not being selective about what one eats. They all knew Xi Jinping's background, but seeing that he wasn't spoiled and willingly shared the better food with the villagers while eating the coarse meal himself, they held him in high esteem. That bran dumpling was indeed hard to swallow, low in calories, and offered little sustenance. After eating it and returning to work, hunger soon returned. At times, when Xi Jinping felt the hunger becoming unbearable, he would open the villager's food parcel again, hoping to take another cornmeal dumpling for a bite. He discovered, however, that the cornmeal dumplings he had exchanged with the villagers remained untouched. Xi Jinping asked Chunma's (the wife of villager Gong Wanfa,

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whose child was named "Chun," and in Shaanxi dialect, "Chun's mother" is referred to as "**Chun's mum's**") ~~she~~"Why aren't any of you eating the corn dumplings?" Chun's mum's replied frankly, "The corn dumplings you gave us are '**real grain**' (), which is 'good food' (). The men and children in the cave work harder (受苦, Shaanxi dialect for labour), so we're saving these for them." This incident deeply moved Xi Jinping, revealing the extreme hardship of rural life. At that time, some better-off urban households had grown accustomed to refined grains and disliked coarse ones. Yet here, even ordinary coarse grains were spared for the labourers.

After arriving in Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping increasingly encountered villagers through daily life and labour. He grew ever more aware of the backwardness of rural areas and the hardships of peasant existence, developing deep sympathy for them and a resolve to undertake practical work for their benefit. I recall that time when we read a pre-Cultural Revolution issue of Poetry Magazine at another educated youth brigade A poet wrote: ~~The~~ mortal world, sharing joys and sorrows with all, Did I believe another heaven exists amidst the crowd." He was deeply moved by it and recited it repeatedly. We did not realise at the time that this was the third poem in the series "Cai Sang Zi: Against **Sorrow**" by Hu Qiming, the scholar within the Party.

The experience of labouring and learning during his rural placement in Liangjiahe formed the bedrock of Xi Jinping's ideological foundation, consciousness, and emotional roots. For a Communist Party worker, without a genuine understanding of the hardships endured by grassroots communities and the struggles faced by those in impoverished regions, it is impossible to truly stand firm on the side of the people. Today, we frequently observe on television Xi Jinping conducting field research in rural areas, placing great emphasis on visiting impoverished regions to gauge public sentiment – places like the southwest, northwest, Jinggangshan, and other areas characterised by being remote, underdeveloped, or home to ethnic minorities. He is intimately familiar with the lives of ordinary people in these regions. When visiting households, his manner is entirely natural: he lifts the lid to see what's in the pot, inquires warmly about their welfare, and engages in conversations that strike at the heart of matters, grasping the realities on the ground. Were such visits merely perfunctory, ~~he~~

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and one would see no genuine emotional expression. Whenever I see Xi Jinping, now General Secretary of the Party, on television still naturally expressing genuine concern for those in hardship, I am deeply moved. I know this sincerity stems from his experiences during his time in Liangjiahe, from the deep affection for the people cultivated bit by bit during his years as an educated youth.

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping was elected Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Village, what were his distinctive traits in daily work? How did he conduct himself in ordinary interactions?

Lei Pingsheng: Liangjiahe was a natural village with many surnames. Complex conflicts inevitably arose between clans, neighbours, neighbouring production teams, and even siblings. As Party Secretary, Xi meticulously addressed these intricate relationships by patiently persuading villagers, encouraging them to set aside differences, unite, and focus on collective progress.

One of Xi Jinping's significant early initiatives was establishing a blacksmithing cooperative in the village. For this venture, he invited Genchuan, the younger brother of Wangchuan (Liang Yuming), to return and work as a blacksmith. Genchuan was a tall, sturdy man with a dark complexion, possessing great strength and considerable skill in his craft. He had a straightforward nature, tending towards bluntness in both speech and manner. He had previously worked as a blacksmith at the Wen'anyi Commune market. Xi mobilised him to return to the commune to forge agricultural implements. This arrangement enabled the village to supply its own farming tools while generating additional income — some "spare cash". However, upon his return, Genchuan discovered his earnings in Liangjiahe were lower than those he had commanded at Wen'anyi. Dissatisfied, he sought to leave. The collective refused to let him go, so he demanded better terms: a monthly increase in his work points. Being a man of blunt speech, he seemed utterly unyielding, even uttering some rather impolite remarks. At that time, the blacksmithing cooperative was a crucial industry for the village. If it were to cease operations abruptly, it would have a significant impact on the village's...

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The losses were considerable. Word of this soon reached Xi Jinping, who promptly sought out Genchuan to discuss the matter. We all knew Xi Jinping to be a rather forthright sort, with a direct manner of speaking. Genchuan was also a stubborn individual, and the two of them were bound to clash if things went badly. We feared that if Xi Jinping went to speak with him and the talks broke down, causing trouble, the ironworks would become even more unworkable. But in fact, not long after, Xi Jinping returned with a smile. He said he had persuaded Genshan to stay. It transpired that Xi Jinping had first reasoned with him logically and appealed to his emotions. When that proved insufficient, he then worked on Gen Shuan's wife. Eventually, he swayed both their minds, and Gen Shuan agreed to remain in Liangjiahe to continue his work for the village ironworks. Thus, among the first tasks Xi Jinping undertook as Liangjiahe **Party Secretary**, the ironworks matter was successfully resolved. In every task he undertook after assuming office required considerable effort. Resolving various conflicts and navigating complex situations demanded meticulous groundwork to ensure smooth implementation. Xi Jinping approached mass work with great attention to method and humanity. He never resorted to forceful or high-pressure tactics, instead prioritising persuasion. By clarifying people's thoughts and resolving their inner reservations, he ensured matters proceeded naturally and successfully.

On another occasion, I accompanied Xi Jinping to the market at Wen'anyi Commune. At that time, he often burned the midnight oil reading by kerosene lamp, so he planned to buy some kerosene and cigarettes there. Our finances were rather tight back then, and with limited funds, we could only afford the cheapest "economy cigarettes" – nine fen per packet, or ninety fen for a carton. Unexpectedly, just as we reached the commune courtyard, we encountered several fellow villagers who told Xi Jinping "There's an old man begging at the market claiming to be your father's former bodyguard. He's made his way from Suide and Mizhi to Wen'anyi begging and upon hearing you were here, he's come looking for you!" Xi Jinping replied, "I'll go and see him." I paid little heed at the time. But soon, the market at Wen'anyi was abuzz. People returning from the market said, "Just now,

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Xi Jinping encountered an old beggar on the street who claimed to be his father's former bodyguard. Jinping emptied his pockets, handing over all his cash, Shaanxi grain coupons, and national grain coupons to the old man. He even took off his overcoat and gave that to him too!*

Hearing this, I was profoundly moved. It was the second time his actions had deeply affected me. In those years of extreme scarcity, ration coupons were vital. With one catty of Shaanxi coupons, you could buy cornmeal for nine fen; without coupons, the price was significantly higher. Xi Jinping himself was strapped for cash and coupons at the time. I know his family had little spare capacity to support him further. It was already September or October in the Gregorian calendar, and northern Shaanxi was turning cold. Yet Xi Jinping took off his coat and gave it to that beggar. In doing so, he gave everything he had, emptied his pockets to help. Ancient praise for those who generously aid others speaks of "offering one's clothes and sharing one's food" – that is, giving away one's garments for another to wear and one's sustenance for another to eat. That Xi Jinping, while facing hardship himself, could still "offer his clothes and share his **food**" **with** the beggar old man speaks volumes of his character and magnanimity.

When Xi returned from the market and met us outside the commune, I inquired about the incident. He replied "That old man claimed to have been my father's former bodyguard. Seeing his hardship—he'd been begging all the way from Suide—my heart went out to him, so I gave him all my money and grain coupons." I said "You gave him everything?" He replied "I gave him everything." I remarked "We won't be able to buy kerosene or cigarettes."

Back in Liangjiahe, I mentioned this to Xi Jinping and asked "Did you verify whether the old man was genuine?" Xi Jinping replied "He knew my mother's name, could name my sister, and other details he mentioned all matched up." Hearing this, I pressed further "Jinping, he wasn't deceiving you, was he?"

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Xi Jinping smiled serenely and said, "I'm just an ordinary farmer now. What could he possibly deceive me about? He was like me." Hearing Xi speak so candidly moved me deeply and filled me with profound respect. His understanding and trust towards this impoverished old man, embodying the ancient sentiment of "How can we say we lack **clothing?** We share the same coat with you," was offered without reservation. Such generosity is beyond the reach of ordinary people and truly rare.

Lei Rongsheng: I was present when Ping-sheng recounted this incident. My understanding is that regardless of whether this old man was Xi's bodyguard, as long as he was a fellow revolutionary from the Red Army days, Ping-sheng held him in profound respect from the depths of his heart. Xi Jinping's act of giving everything he had was driven partly by his own feelings and generosity, and partly by the profound distress and reluctance he felt seeing this old man, who had joined the revolution so early, reduced to begging on the streets. One could say that Xi Jinping gave the old man everything he had purely out of respect for the revolutionary generation of his father's age.

Interview Team: "I'm just an ordinary farmer now." When Xi Jinping spoke with you about that elderly gentleman at the Wen'an post station, he uttered this phrase quite naturally. How do you interpret Xi Jinping's words?

LeiPingsheng By that time, we had been working in the countryside for several years. Xi Jinping describing himself as "an ordinary farmer" reflected a shift in his mindset and emotional connection to the peasantry. He did not identify as an "educated youth" but as an "ordinary farmer," demonstrating his complete immersion among the farming community. Xi Jinping harboured profound affection for grassroots citizens and farmers. In recent years, he has repeatedly emphasised that poverty alleviation must be targeted and precise. This stems from his own experience as a farmer; he understands and empathises deeply with the peasantry. Whether during his time as an educated youth or as a village brigade secretary, his purpose was always clear: to serve the people.

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serve the people. This approach differs markedly from those who lack rural or grassroots experience. Only by enduring hardship at the grassroots level, understanding the people's thoughts, concerns, and needs, can one truly share their urgency, anticipate their concerns, adopt effective working methods, and deliver tangible benefits.

Lei Rongsheng: Xi Jinping not only frequently referred to himself as a farmer but also often spoke of his old ~~farmer~~ contexts. This clearly shows that by then, he had already considered himself one of the farmers of northern Shaanxi. He genuinely felt it was an honour to be counted among the working people.

Lei Pingsheng: There's a saying, "One's words carry weight when one is insignificant," meaning that those of humble status speak without authority and go unheard. But with Xi Jinping, this was simply not the case. In his eyes, there was no distinction between rich and poor, noble and lowly; he believed every person deserved respect. When Xi engaged with others, even if they were the poorest of the poor, he listened with complete attention. Everyone who spoke with him felt a warmth in their heart. He is not like some who turn away from the poor, feigning blindness and indifference. Wang Cuiyu, a Beijing-born educated youth in our village, praised Xi Jinping at her farewell gathering after securing employment. "In Xi Jinping's eyes, there are no social hierarchies, no favouritism or condescension. He always speaks with a smile and genuine warmth. That is truly remarkable!" "Xi Jinping regarded himself as a farmer, as part of the yellow earth. This conviction was fully evident in a conversation we had when he resolved to shoulder heavy responsibilities in Liangjiahe Village. In the latter half of 1973, while serving as a social education cadre in Zhaojiahe, he returned to Liangjiahe one day.

He asked me about my future plans over a meal. I replied, "I still wish to attend university." When I inquired about his own intentions, Xi Jinping stated, "I won't be applying for university in 1974." Taken aback, I asked, "The 1974 admissions for workers, peasants, and soldiers are a rare opportunity. Why not apply?" Xi Jinping responded, "I've been in Liangjiahe for several years now. The villagers have treated me well. I can't just leave like that. I must help the people accomplish something."

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just leave like this. I need to help the villagers get things done."

At the time, Xi Jinping was engaged in "**reorganisation**" work in Zhaojiahe Village. The regional revolutionary committee had instructed all counties across the district to "work in shifts and teams, labouring intensively and rapidly," with numerous initiatives underway in full swing. Xi gained considerable experience in rural affairs during this period. He contemplated that upon leaving Zhaojiahe, he would return to Liangjiahe to accomplish tangible work for the village, leading the villagers to increase grain yields and contribute his modest efforts to this land. This aspiration was sound, yet from a personal perspective, the opportunity to attend university remained exceptionally rare. Particularly as **the Cultural Revolution** entered its final phase, Premier Zhou Enlai's advocacy had prompted changes in higher education admissions policies, allowing recruitment of university students from grassroots levels. This opened avenues for us educated youth to pursue tertiary education. The political climate remained complex, and future admissions policies could easily reverse. In 1973 alone, recruitment criteria and procedures underwent significant adjustments following Zhang Tiesheng's letter. Should enrolment suddenly cease, those who hadn't departed might find themselves unable to leave. Thus I advised Xi Jinping "Jinping, you must consider this carefully. 1974 presents an opportunity. Should circumstances change and enrolment cease, you may never attend university." "If I can't go, I'll just stay here," Xi Jinping replied. "I'm a farmer by nature anyway!"

Over forty years later, Xi Jinping shared with me how his thinking evolved back then. He said his resolve to become a farmer in northern Shaanxi was no empty promise. Before deciding to return to Liangjiahe and shoulder heavy responsibilities, he had lain on the land for a long time, gazing at the blue sky, determined to work hard in the countryside like his father and brothers. He resolved to be a farmer for the rest of his life!

Reflecting now on Xi Jinping's state of mind at the time, I discern two aspects: on the one hand, he genuinely regarded Shaanxi as his homeland—the very soil where his father and elder brother had fought—and felt it entirely natural to become one of its labouring people; on the other, he had developed profound affection for this land of Northern Shaanxi.

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At that time, his family faced immense pressure. His father, Xi Daozhang, suffered unjust persecution, and his siblings endured political discrimination, scattered far and wide. Many regarded him with suspicion, yet the villagers of Liangjiahe accepted and respected him unreservedly. Through his diligent toil on the loess plateau, he earned the people's deep recognition and trust. The villagers protected him, cherished him, and entrusted him to lead them forward. He came to realise profoundly that it was the people of Northern Shaanxi who had nurtured and shaped him, and that he owed them a debt of gratitude. He resolved to do something for Liangjiahe.

Lei Rongsheng: Beyond the factors Xi Jinping himself mentioned, another reason he wished to remain in northern Shaanxi as a farmer was his urgent desire to contribute to transforming this impoverished and backward region. In May 1973, Premier Zhou Enlai accompanied foreign guests to Yan'an. Witnessing how little the area had changed since liberation and the continued hardship endured by its people, Premier Zhou was deeply distressed and even shed tears. This incident profoundly affected the cadres and masses of Yan'an. Transforming Yan'an's landscape and enabling its people to live better lives became an urgent imperative. Xi Jinping was deeply moved by this, feeling compelled to respond to and implement Premier Zhou's call, to prove himself worthy of the people of Northern Shaanxi.

Lei Pingsheng: That is indeed the case. At that time, the production brigade needed young people who were bold in their thinking, enterprising in their actions, and broad-minded to lead the members in forging ahead. Xi Jinping himself possessed this resolve and was willing to shoulder this heavy responsibility. Later, he did indeed take on this burden and brought about tremendous changes to Liangjiahe.

Interview Team: After Xi Jinping became Party Secretary of Liangjiahe Village, what practical measures did he implement for the community?

Lei Pingsheng: After becoming Party Secretary, Xi Jinping genuinely desired from the heart to lead the villagers in transforming Liangjiahe's appearance.

He wrote to a research institute at the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, seeking assistance with grain seeds, vegetable varieties, and cultivation techniques. The agricultural scientists proved quite helpful, sending a large parcel of vegetable seeds including tomatoes,

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The Academy of Agricultural Sciences proved quite helpful, sending a large parcel of vegetable seeds including tomatoes, cucumbers, and Chinese cabbage. Upon receiving the seeds, Xi specifically allocated a plot for experimental cultivation. The vegetable yields proved satisfactory, and the villagers shared the harvest several times, enjoying the produce immensely.

Xi Jinping understood the importance of seeds because, shortly after arriving in Liangjiahe, the brigade secretary, Liang Yuming, had arranged for him to study seed cultivation at the county seed production station. The station cultivated high-quality seeds, which were then distributed to the commune and delivered to the brigade. Xi took this task seriously and immersed himself in it, actively learning breeding techniques and meticulously taking notes in a small notebook. Back in his cave dwelling, he would enthusiastically explain seed production knowledge to me – the relationship between the paternal line No. 1, the first generation offspring, and the second generation offspring; why hybridisation yields hybrid vigour; and so on. Xi was deeply fascinated by this subject, so he explained it to me in great detail and with genuine relish.

I witnessed the entire process of Xi Jinping leading the villagers in digging wells. At that time, there was a slogan: "Water conservancy is the lifeblood of agriculture." In our Shaanbei region, irrigated fields on the plains generally yielded higher crops of better quality. However, irrigation required a sufficient water source; relying on rainfall alone was insufficient. Northern Shaanxi is arid with scarce rainfall, and when rain does fall, it drains away swiftly. A continuous water source was therefore essential. How could such a source be found? After becoming village Party secretary, Xi Jinping conducted investigations and learned that a spring had once seeped from a specific location in the front brigade. Though now lost, the spring remained buried beneath the soil and could be unearthed. Following detailed surveys, they located a marker that had once pinpointed the spring's position. In early spring 1974, shortly after assuming his post, Xi mobilised the entire infrastructure team to excavate this well. Xi Jinping, Wu Yuhua, Liang Yuming, and I were all on the front line of the digging operation. As we descended, the pit grew larger and the soil increasingly damp. Yet at a certain depth, the shovels became too cumbersome to wield effectively. We therefore erected a well frame outside the pit, fitted with pulleys. Xi would descend

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down to continue the excavation. After a spell, we would take turns descending to relieve him. The weather was bitterly cold; we wore padded jackets, which became caked in mud, with earth constantly falling from above, coating our heads in grime. Through persistent effort, we finally located the water source: a spring as thick as an arm, flowing steadily. Once the water emerged, we needed to dam it up at this spot to retain the flow. The weather was bitterly cold, and ice had frozen solid with the soil. If the ice remained trapped beneath the earth, it would inevitably seep through the dam as temperatures rose later. Therefore, we had to use pickaxes or mattocks to chisel away this frozen mixture of ice and earth. The construction team had many women and children, with only a handful of able-bodied men like us. It was bitterly cold, and the team members stood by, reluctant to step into the icy water for fear of freezing their feet. Xi Jinping took the lead, leaping onto the ice and digging relentlessly with his pickaxe and mattock. Wu Yuhua, a man of great vigour and skilled at rallying others, called out to the group = Look, Secretary Xi has already gone down! He's an educated youth ~~big~~ yet he's willing to endure such hardship! We're building a dam for our own homes—how can we not put in the effort?" After shouting this, Wu Yuhua also jumped down and began digging alongside Xi Jinping. At that moment, everyone else was inspired to join in, descending to dig vigorously and clear away the remaining ice.

Once the well was completed, it not only solved the drinking water problem for the members of the front brigade, but also provided sufficient water for irrigation, meeting the needs of both production and daily life.

I also know quite a bit about the biogas project. At the time, Xi Jinping went to Suining County in Sichuan to learn biogas technology and even invited a technician to Liangjiahe to help. This technician, originally a bricklayer, was highly skilled in mixing cement, preventing sand holes, avoiding gas leaks, determining biogas tank specifications, and securing the outer stone slabs. However, after working for a while, he found life in northern Shaanxi unsettling in many respects and longed to return to his hometown in Sichuan. He experienced several bouts of wavering resolve, all stemming from his desire to go home. Jinping repeatedly worked with him, easing his mental burdens and making proper arrangements for his living arrangements.

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arrangements for his living conditions. Ultimately, the technician did not abandon his post prematurely, remaining until the essential work was completed before returning home.

Interview Team: During these seven years of rural placement, Xi Jinping laid a solid foundation for his life, fastening the "first button of his life". What do you believe were the reasons he fastened this "first button of his life"?

Lei Pingsheng: The seven years spent in the countryside constituted the most crucial phase in Xi Jinping's life journey, playing an indispensable role in his overall growth, maturation, and eventual success. Xi Jinping's ability to take his first step in life correctly and fasten the "first button of his life" stemmed from both internal factors. On the one hand, these seven years saw him striving diligently, self-reliant and persevering, undergoing rigorous tempering – this constituted the vital internal driver of his development. On the other hand, external factors were equally significant. To elaborate, I believe his development stemmed primarily from the following aspects.

First, Xi Jinping consistently engaged in manual labour, self-discipline, and learning during his time in the countryside. Having spent six years with him in Liangjiahe, I witnessed his relentless efforts and self-reliance across all aspects, bearing witness to his entire process of putting down roots in the rural community.

Secondly, the nurturing provided by the Party organisation. From Liangjiahe Brigade and Wen'anyi Commune to Yanchuan County, the care and support extended to Xi Jinping by Party organisations at every level formed a crucial foundation for his development. This included the concern, guidance, encouragement, and assistance he received from figures such as Zhao Tingbi, the Party Secretary of Fengjiaping Commune, whom I mentioned earlier.

Thirdly, the care and education imparted by the people of Northern Shaanxi. Xi Jinping himself has recounted how, during his most trying times, the villagers of Northern Shaanxi took him in, nurtured him, and educated him. The affection shown by the masses fostered in him a profound sense of gratitude towards the rural populace.

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Fourthly, the influence of family and environment. The profound impact on Xi Jinping stemmed from the guidance and unwavering encouragement provided by his father, Xi Zhongxun, and his mother, Aunt Qi Xin, through both words and deeds.

Another significant figure frequently mentioned by Xi during his rural years was his maternal aunt, Aunt Qi Yun. Xi recounted to me on several occasions how he benefited from her care and heeded her guidance. Initially, Xi would share with his aunt the hardships of life in northern Shaanxi and the harsh conditions there. Aunt Qi Yun was a veteran revolutionary who had long persevered in the rear-area struggle during the War of Resistance Against Japan, possessing profound insight into rural life. During that period, she fought on the front lines of the Jinzhaoji Base Area, a region where Japanese puppet forces and the Eighth Route Army were interlocked, creating an extremely perilous situation where sacrifice was ever-present. Auntie Qiyun told Xi Jinping: "Back then, we could only rely resolutely on the local villagers. Only by finding them could we persist in the struggle and survive. How could one possibly despise the hardships of rural life or the perceived backwardness of farmers? Had we abandoned the villagers then, Communist Party members would have perished a single day." After returning, Xi Jinping relayed his aunt's teachings to me, demonstrating the profound influence the elderly Auntie Qiyun had on him.

Throughout Xi Jinping's formative years, the family ethos exerted a profound, subtle influence. In 1972, when his household faced its gravest hardship, his maternal grandmother passed away. After the family attended the solemn memorial service, I encountered the deeply grieving Aunt Qixin, Sister Qiaoqiao, and Xi Jinping at their home in Xinjiekou. Upon seeing me, Sister Qiaoqiao recounted the memorial service and passionately recited the eulogy composed by my cousin Wei Beiling for the elder: "At the critical juncture when the elder resolutely led the entire family into the Taihang Mountains to join the revolution and enlist in the Eighth Route Army." Her words brimmed with fervour. The profound influence of growing up in such a family, brimming with progressive ideals and positive energy, on Xi Jinping's development is self-evident.

It is also worth mentioning two teachers Xi Jinping had during his time at the Bayi School: Chen Qiuying and Qi Rongxian.

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Both successively served as Xi Jinping's form tutor and Chinese language teacher during his junior secondary years. Xi Jinping recounted to me on several occasions in the cave dwelling how, during the most intense period of **the Cultural Revolution**, they repeatedly urged him with heartfelt earnestness: to trust the Party, to observe discipline, and to refrain from acting inappropriately towards teachers. Such reminders and admonitions were exceptionally rare and precious at that time.

Interview Team: Xi Jinping's passion for reading is widely acknowledged. You yourself enjoy reading and learning having shared the same cave dwelling with him for approximately six years and engaged in frequent exchanges on academic pursuits. Could you describe the distinctive characteristics of Xi Jinping's approach to reading and learning?

Lei Pingsheng: Learning is a process of continually enriching and elevating oneself. Xi Jinping possesses broad perspectives, an active mind, and strong analytical abilities, all of which stem from his diligent study. During his years of labour in the rural areas of northern Shaanxi, he maintained his habit of studious learning day in, day out. From what I understand, Xi Jinping's approach to reading and learning had several distinctive features.

First, he was diligent and studious to the point of working day and night. As some fellow villagers recounted — he would read whenever he could find a spare moment, seizing every opportunity to study. During the day he worked in the mountains, and at night, whenever he had a moment after returning home, he would read. Later, most of the educated youth left, and only the two of us remained in the cave dwelling. We each had our own sleeping space on the heated bed, separated by a low table bearing a kerosene lamp. After a day's labour, I'd often retire to bed after supper if tired. But Xi Jinping would invariably pick up his books again to study. Mindful of disturbing my sleep, he'd move the lamp aside and shield the light with his body. He'd often read until the small hours. Sometimes, waking in the middle of the night, I'd find him still reading. "Ningping, I'd ask 'why aren't you asleep yet?' He'd invariably reply 'Just a little longer.' Once, during a daytime conversation he teased me 'Last night, reading deep into the quiet hours, I rather felt the flavour of 'all men are asleep, I alone am **awake'.**'"

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." On another occasion he remarked with some feeling "Life as an educated youth in the countryside truly combined physical labour with mental exertion to a remarkable degree" This was indeed the case. The day's labour was strenuous, leaving one exhausted, and the daily meals were meagre. Returning to the kiln house for prolonged reading required the brain to work at high speed, placing considerable demands on both physical and mental stamina.

Secondly, his reading emphasised analysis and comparison. On the one hand, Xi Jinping would seek out numerous relevant reference books on a single viewpoint or historical fact for comparative study, examining the issue from multiple angles. On the other hand, once he had formed his own insights and perspectives, he would engage in discussions with others. He often read several books simultaneously, comparing and analysing them. He not only examined the similarities and differences between various interpretations but also scrutinised why authors held certain views – truly grasping both **the "what" and the "why"**. For instance, while studying Soviet historian Semenov's Medieval History, he consulted a Christian Reader for Young People obtained from an unknown source. Given the limitations of our education at the time, we possessed little understanding of Christianity. Xi Jinping's approach to studying this subject enabled him to gain a comprehensive grasp of the historical repression of Christianity as a grassroots faith by the Roman authorities during the Roman Empire. This illustrates the value of continually expanding one's reference materials while reading.

Lei Rongsheng: Xi Jinping's approach to reading, simply put, involved focusing on one primary text while simultaneously seeking out related works for corroboration, thereby continually expanding his knowledge. For instance, when studying Chinese history, he primarily used Fan Wenlan's Concise General History of China as his main text. However, upon encountering differing viewpoints among historians during his studies, he would cross-reference and compare various versions of Chinese history books by authors such as Qian Mu and Lü Zhenyu to deepen his understanding. This approach yields a multidimensional, comprehensive historical perspective. It enables him to grasp both the connections and divergences between viewpoints while cultivating the habit of analysing issues from multiple angles.

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Lei Pingsheng: That is indeed the case. After familiarising himself with the perspectives of various scholars, Xi Jinping took great pleasure in independent reflection. He would often ask me "Have you read this book?" If I had, he would engage me in discussion on a particular viewpoint. He showed considerable interest in debating, refining, and verifying those crucial points of knowledge. Though the subjects we debated at that age may not have been profoundly deep or highly specialised, they certainly served to invigorate our thinking and broaden our horizons.

On one occasion when Xi Jinping was staying in collective accommodation during a trip, he encountered a young lecturer specialising in Party history at the Central Party School. They engaged in a discussion about the May Fourth Movement. During that exchange with the young lecturer, Xi Jinping noted an important detail. Upon returning, he shared his insights with me. He believed that the May Fourth Movement marked the watershed between the old and new democratic revolutions. The May Fourth Movement was a thorough anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movement within the democratic revolution. While established theories existed regarding its causes, that discussion with the Party School lecturer helped him grasp a crucial point: the May Fourth Movement erupted not merely as a spontaneous popular uprising, but as a thorough anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movement democratic revolution, a thoroughgoing movement against imperialism and feudalism. Numerous established theories exist regarding its causes. Yet in that discussion with the Party School lecturer, he grasped a crucial point: the May Fourth Movement erupted not only as a product of accumulated domestic contradictions, but also as a result of accumulated international contradictions acting as a catalyst. At the Paris Peace Conference following the First World War, China, as a nation, put forward entirely just demands: the abolition of foreign spheres of influence in China, the withdrawal of foreign troops from Chinese territory, and the cancellation of **the "Twenty-One Demands"**. Yet the Paris Conference not only rejected these demands but shockingly decided to transfer Germany's rights in Shandong, China, to Japan. Where was this "**triumph of justice over might**"? The world remained dominated by power politics, and China's hopes of being "accepted by **the world**" were utterly dashed. In this context, the Chinese populace – primarily advanced intellectuals and educated youth – grew profoundly disillusioned with the Western camp, fuelling unprecedented anti-imperialist sentiment. Their gaze turned towards neighbouring Soviet Russia, **fresh** from its October Revolution, where they sought inspiration for radically transforming China and its society. The outbreak of the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and the founding of the Communist Party of China in 1921 were both political events closely intertwined with the aforementioned international landscape, public sentiment, and popular emotions.

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The international backdrop of the time was a significant factor compelling the Chinese people to raise the slogans of national salvation: "Down with the imperialist powers! Down with the warlords!" and "Fight for sovereignty abroad, eliminate traitors at home!"

Xi Jinping recounted to me with great feeling **Wilson's "Fourteen Points for Peace"** the League of Nations, the Paris Peace Conference, and the stances of Britain and France. Today our historical knowledge is vastly enriched, and such matters may be considered common knowledge. Yet in an era when books and information were scarce, these ideas sounded quite novel to us, who were thirsty for knowledge. This demonstrates how keen Xi Jinping was to absorb new knowledge.

Interview Team: Please discuss Xi Jinping's study of Marxist classics. Lei Pingsheng: In the 1970s, certain Marxist-Leninist classics—such as *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Civil War in France*, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, *Anti-Dühring*, and *The State and Revolution*, were required and encouraged reading. Xi Jinping studied them repeatedly. He once discussed certain issues expounded in *The State and Revolution* with an acquaintance. One such issue was that communism has a primary stage (socialism) and a higher stage. The advanced stage signifies the entry into communism, at which point the state will gradually wither away. His friend and Xi Jinping debated how the state would wither away: would it be through the gradual subsidence of class struggle, with everyone diligently engaged in production? Or would it be as it is now, with struggles flaring up intermittently, occurring every seven or eight years, and sometimes even intensifying? In hindsight, the topic itself was neither particularly significant nor amenable to deep exploration. Yet such discussions stimulated his thinking and fostered new insights into many of the "leftist" practices of the era. During the Cultural Revolution, with class struggle as the guiding principle, the nation was in turmoil and people's living standards remained stagnant for years. Xi Jinping gradually began to question this prolonged, relentless, and intense class struggle, prompting deeper reflection.

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Whenever Xi Jinping visited his family at the **May Seventh Cadre School** or travelled elsewhere, he invariably brought back new books. On one occasion, he returned with a thick volume of *Capital* translated by Guo Dali and Wang Yanan, which he read intently while reclining on the heated bed. Later, he discussed the work with me. He shared considerable knowledge about the evolution of different editions of *Capital*, emphasising the importance of studying its translations. He held the version by Guo Dali and Wang Yanan in particularly high regard. He explained that these two translators were also sociologists who had devoted their lives to translating and introducing Marxist works to China, a mission they pursued tirelessly throughout their careers. Xi Jinping spoke of their steadfastness and perseverance, emphasising that only through unwavering commitment and consistent dedication to any endeavour could one realise one's lifelong aspirations. He held these two scholars in the highest regard, admiring not only their scholarly achievements but also their noble character.

Xi Jinping pays close attention to the evolution of Marxist-Leninist texts. On one occasion, he discussed the various Chinese translations of *The Communist Manifesto*, noting that this work has been rendered into Chinese from Russian, Japanese, German, English, and French sources. While numerous scholars have contributed to these translations, each version reflects distinct emphases and interpretations of the text. He remarked with some reflection: "Such a slim volume of classic literature has given rise to so many variations, demonstrating how challenging it is to grasp the truth."

Xi Jinping's philosophical reading primarily centres on Marxist-Leninist philosophy. He has devoted considerable effort to studying historical materialism and dialectical materialism. Recently, I observed him elucidating dialectical materialism on television, specifically addressing principal contradictions and the principal aspect of a contradiction. During his studies of dialectics in the cave dwellings, he had previously emphasised this point: dialectics must not be oversimplified. The different aspects of a contradiction are inseparably and closely linked, each serving as the basis for the other's existence. While the essence of dialectics undoubtedly lies in the law of the unity of opposites, in practice, this unity must be considered alongside the opposition. Materialist dialectics inherently encompasses the interconnection and development of things, as well as laws such as the negation of negation and the transformation of quantity into quality. To discuss one aspect in isolation, disregarding other factors, is inevitably partial. To reduce the content of dialectics to merely the character 'fight' is to oversimplify the entire issue.

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one aspect of an issue while disregarding other factors is undoubtedly one-sided. To believe that the content of dialectics is merely the word "struggle" is to oversimplify the entire matter.

Having spent considerable time within the environment of the Central Party School, Xi Jinping was familiar with the process of criticising the "**two-in-one'**" theory of Yang Xianzhen and Hou Weiyu at the Central Party School, which began in the mid-1960s. He also informed me that Li Ming, a philosophy teacher at the Party School who suffered persecution during this campaign, was the father of our classmate Li Xiaolu from the 1966 cohort at Bayi School.

Interview Team: Please discuss Xi Jinping's engagement with historical works.

Lei Pingsheng: When we first arrived in Liangjiahe, we had only completed secondary school. The curriculum at that level did not cover world history. As Xi Jinping read numerous Marxist classics, he encountered many terms and events connected to European history, which felt unfamiliar to him. He then sought out a Soviet-published History of the Middle Ages to study. He seems to have borrowed this volume from a local teacher's home. The work provided a relatively comprehensive account of the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, Charlemagne, and the nascent forms of modern France, Germany, and Britain. It also covered the historical evolution and transformations of Eastern nations. Through studying this book, Xi gained an initial understanding of the developmental histories of European countries.

Xi also frequently consulted a reference work titled *Newly Compiled Dictionary of New Knowledge*, published in 1952. This voluminous reference book contained numerous important entries with concise, clear explanations. Terms such as "Holy Roman Empire," "Suvorov," and "February Revolution" could all be found within its pages. Xi habitually used this dictionary as a reference while reading other works.

Xi Jinping harboured a profound interest in classical Chinese texts. He often read *Annotations on the Book of Changes* and *Annotations on the I Ching*.

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Han Shu Xuan, and Records of the Three Kingdoms.

Xi Jinping has also read extensively on Chinese history and culture. For instance, during the Criticise Legalism, Reject Confucianism movement, he acquired a copy of A History of Ancient Chinese Thought by Professor Yang Rongguo of Sun Yat-sen University, which was popular at the time, and read it with great enthusiasm. This work provided a thorough and comprehensive introduction to Confucianism and Legalism. Setting aside contemporary evaluations of the philosophical schools within ancient Chinese Confucianism and Legalism, the author presented the fundamental tenets of these schools alongside the historical facts of their existence, development, dissemination, and evolution within ancient Chinese society. This enabled Xi Jinping to gain a clear understanding and grasp of the relevant content.

Interview Team: Xi Jinping has read a vast amount of literary works. Not only is he a voracious reader, but he also possesses a high level of literary appreciation. Could you elaborate on this aspect?

Lei Pingsheng: Certainly. Xi Jinping has a profound appreciation for classical Chinese poetry. He has read works such as the Lament of Departure, the Source of Ancient Poetry, Selected Poems of Li Bai, and Selected Poems of the Three Caos. He particularly admires the tragic grandeur and desolate melancholy found in Cao Cao's works, as well as the sincere, unadorned, and majestic style of the Jian'an Yuefu poems. Among ci poetry, he favours the works of Xin Qiji. At times, when deeply moved by classical verse, he would rush into the courtyard to recite aloud, or even chant while labouring on the hillside. Possessing a formidable memory, he would commit most favoured poems to heart after reading them. Should he encounter a piece he admired the previous evening, he would recite it to me the following day. This stemmed partly from his genuine appreciation for the verse's cadence, and partly as a test of his own memory. As his listener, I found his recitations deeply uplifting. Generally, he favoured poetry that was impassioned, bold, and self-assured. Naturally, he also cherished the ethereal, romantic works of Li Bai, and I heard him recite Li Bai's "Invitation to Drink" many times.

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These masterpieces of ancient Chinese literature enabled the young Xi Jinping to gain a deeper understanding of our nation, appreciate the outstanding culture of the Chinese people, and comprehend China's historical transformations. These works imbued him with powerful positive energy and cultivated his profound love for his homeland. It can be said that Xi Jinping's later proposal of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation was founded upon his profound understanding of his country's outstanding culture and historical traditions. Today, Xi Jinping frequently quotes classical texts with remarkable ease in his speeches, demonstrating the profound influence of China's outstanding traditional culture upon him.

Xi Jinping has also read extensively from the world's literary classics. During recent visits to Russia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, he has referenced outstanding literary works from these nations that he has personally studied. Each work he cites is one he has read with great care. From what I recall, he particularly enjoys the novels of Balzac and Maupassant, as well as Shakespeare's plays. When he visited the countryside, he brought along the four-volume epic work *Quiet Flows the Don* by the Soviet author Sholokhov. We divided the reading among ourselves. You would read the first volume while I tackled the second. Occasionally, our reading paces diverged, and when we couldn't synchronise, we would exchange updates on the plot developments. Naturally, we would also discuss the novel's narrative while working. *Ninety-Three* was another book Xi Jinping greatly admired; he frequently engaged us in discussions about the fierce and brutal class struggles during the tumultuous period of the French Revolution. *War and Peace*, *Nineteen Eighteen*, *Les Misérables*, and other classics rich in humanistic depth were all favoured by Xi Jinping. Reading these foreign masterpieces broadened his thinking and horizons, nourishing his spirit.

During **the Cultural Revolution**, with its stifling ideological constraints and scarcity of books, everyone's soul felt like a desert. Later, as the political climate shifted, some relaxation came, and certain works deemed "acceptable" by the mainstream, such as *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, could be published and sold. Yet restrictions remained. Xi Jinping read almost every essay in *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* with meticulous care.

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I recall him once explaining to me the origin of the title for Lu Xun's essay collection Qie Jie Ting Za Wen (Essays from the Pavilion of the Sword): it was formed by removing half of each character from the words for 鲁迅 (Lu Xun). As Lu Xun resided adjacent to the concession area at the time, he thus described his dwelling as a "semi-colonial" place. I vividly recall Xi Jinping once recounting, with great passion, the moment when Xu Zhimo interjected with his brilliant remark during the debate between Lu Xun and the "Modern Commentary School" of Hu Shi and Chen Xiying: "Hold on Let us shout at both sides of this brawl Hold on!"

Interview Panel: Xi Jinping has mentioned on several occasions his reading of military and international political works. These texts were clearly pivotal in shaping his military knowledge and understanding of international politics and relations. Could you elaborate on this aspect?

Lei Pingsheng: Indeed, Xi Jinping has read extensively on military affairs and international politics. A point of clarification is necessary here. When we went to the countryside, we all brought books with us. Among them, Xi Jinping carried a considerable number covering politics, philosophy, literature, and history. Owing to my family background, the books I brought leaned heavily towards history and military studies. Particularly noteworthy were the books on the Second World War reprinted and published by the General Staff Department of the People's Liberation Army. The reprinting of this series dates back to the 1950s and 1960s, when Mao Zedong commissioned the General Staff Department to translate and publish these works to broaden the horizons of senior military commanders. The collection included titles such as Secret Notes on Roosevelt, Rommel's War Papers, and Pacific Warfare: Island Warfare. Among the books brought to the rural area of Yanchuan were also works by renowned foreign military strategists available at the time, such as Selected Military Writings of Marx and Engels and On War, alongside Chinese military treatises including Selected Ancient Chinese Military Theories and Thirty-Six Stratagems.

Xi Jinping paid particular attention to studying Mao Zedong's military theories and operational methods, engaging in extensive reading and deep comprehension. For instance, Mao's Selected Military Writings, compiled by the Academy of Military Sciences,

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compiled by the Academy of Military Sciences, which gathered Mao Zedong's military writings from successive domestic revolutionary wars and the War of Resistance Against Japan. Xi devoted himself to studying several key works within this collection, repeatedly reading pivotal articles such as Mao's *On the Strategic Question of the Chinese Revolutionary War* and *Ten Major Military Principles* to achieve a comprehensive grasp. In his studies, he sought not only to grasp the issues Mao addressed and how he articulated them, but also to understand why these issues were raised and explained in such a manner. He paid particular attention to the timing, location, and context of the original discourses. Following the 1972 political campaign criticising Lin Biao and Confucius, numerous articles on the Liaoshen Campaign appeared in the press. By integrating these materials, he systematically studied Mao's guiding principles concerning the Liaoshen, Huaihai, and Pingjin campaigns. He gained a thorough understanding of the critical steps and processes within these three major campaigns, becoming thoroughly familiar with tactical measures such as "**luring the enemy into a trap," "encircling by isolating without encircling," "the minor and major Huaihai campaigns,**" and "eliminating one, pincering another, and observing the third."

The most brilliant aspect of Mao Zedong's military thought lies in actively seizing the initiative. Rather than passively yielding to the enemy's constraints, one must leverage one's own strengths, attack the enemy's weaknesses with one's own advantages, and fully exploit asymmetric warfare tactics to control the opponent without being controlled oneself. Some have distilled this into three principles: fight the enemy you face, fight with the weapons you possess, and fight where the battle lies. Grasping such strategic thinking and game theory should greatly inspire Xi Jinping in developing a scientific approach to problem-solving.

Studying Clausewitz's seminal military treatise *On War*, Xi Jinping was most struck by the author's descriptions of "discerning insight" and "military genius". *OW* stands as a globally renowned treatise on military theory. Prominent senior commanders of the People's Liberation Army, such as Liu Bocheng and Ye Jianying, were thoroughly versed in its incisive analyses. During the War of Resistance Against Japan, Mao Zedong further mandated its diligent study throughout the armed forces, insisting on earnest engagement with its principles without the slightest complacency.¹⁰

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Clausewitz's concept of "discernment" refers to "emits an inner radiance to illuminate truth even in profound darkness, coupled with the courage to advance by that light. The former is termed insight or discernment (French: *coup d'oeil*), the latter **decisiveness.**" A military commander possessing this "discerning eye" is capable of viewing issues and analysing situations with foresight amidst complex political, economic, and military conditions, thereby leading the nation and its forces to victory. Naturally, at that time, Xi Jinping was merely an ordinary educated youth living in the countryside. Yet, his engagement with these works undoubtedly laid a solid foundation for his intellectual awakening and subsequent development.

During the 1960s and 1970s, China's primary threat emanated from the north. In March 1969 (), armed clashes erupted at Zhenbao Island along the Sino-Soviet border, while Soviet forces amassed a million troops along the Sino-Mongolian frontier. By October 1969 (), the nation entered a state of combat readiness. Mao Zedong demanded that "entire Party study military affairs and prepare for battle." Among the books we brought were several military works reflecting the Soviet Great Patriotic War, such as *The Development of Soviet Army Tactics During the Great Patriotic War* and *Major Battles of the Soviet Great Patriotic War* (in three volumes plus an illustrated edition). With the aim of familiarising himself with the strategic and operational thinking and combat patterns of the Soviet forces, Xi Jinping devoted considerable time to carefully reading key sections of these books. He held in high esteem the tenacious fighting spirit, profound sense of duty, and fearless sacrifice demonstrated by Soviet officers and soldiers during the early stages of the anti-fascist war, particularly in the Battle of Smolensk and the subsequent Battle of Moscow. The stirring declaration, "Our Motherland may be vast, but we have nowhere to retreat—behind us lies only Moscow," left a lasting impression upon him.

The Battle of Kursk constituted the most pivotal engagement on the Eastern Front in 1943. Victory here enabled the Soviet forces to seize the initiative in the conflict. To gain detailed insight into the battle's progression, he spread the illustrated volume *Major Battles of the Great Patriotic War* across the heated bed, while he

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He lay on the bed, poring over the text to decipher unfamiliar Russian place names. This was arduous study; often, it took considerable time to grasp a single phase, followed by simple "**wargaming**" to reconstruct the events. Naturally, doubts and questions arose, along with uncertainties and conjectures. For instance: Why did the German army, having issued operational directives as early as April 1943, delay

until July? How did the Soviet High Command assess the direction of the German offensive? In the early 1970s, we could not have known facts such as the intelligence provided to Stalin's High Command by British MI6 agent Philip Philby or the Swiss Red Orchestra. We could only speculate that the High Command's intelligence assessments drew from the extensive guerrilla units active behind enemy lines and information gathered from enemy prisoners of war on the battlefield. We greatly admire Stalin, Zhukov and others for their accurate assessment of the direction of German operations on the Eastern Front, as well as the Soviet Army's tactical flexibility and mobility (such as launching artillery counter-preparations before the campaign commenced).

Whilst reading Roosevelt's Secret Memoirs, Xi Jinping noted with keen interest how the then-emerging power, America, maintained a low profile for an extended period, accumulating strength before ultimately exploiting contradictions and guiding events to achieve a smooth transition. This enabled it to seamlessly assume global hegemony from the established power, Britain. The book meticulously documents President Roosevelt's far-sightedness, methodical approach, and masterful diplomatic manoeuvring throughout this process. At a series of pivotal international conferences, he steadfastly supported the Allied powers Britain and the Soviet Union in their anti-fascist war effort, providing material and military backing. Simultaneously, he leveraged bilateral and multilateral forums to champion new global political and economic frameworks – not to restore Britain's former order, but to forge a new chapter for America. Diplomatically, Roosevelt courted "**Uncle Joe**" **Stalin** by recognising Soviet spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and Asia, ensuring America's position of diplomatic ascendancy over Britain through the principle that "he who holds the moral high ground gains the support of many." Fully leveraging economic and military might while occupying the moral high ground, President Roosevelt's declaration 

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are competitors" encapsulated the essence of international politics and great power rivalry.

Xi Jinping also read The Pacific War: Island Warfare. This work depicts the arduous struggle between the United States and Japan in the Pacific theatre after 1943. During his reading, he meticulously examined the strategic contingency plans formulated by both nations prior to the Pacific War's outbreak, comparing and evaluating the merits and shortcomings of each side's strategic decisions. It must be acknowledged that throughout the Pacific War, Japan held a distinct disadvantage in decision-making, the possession of war resources, and the capacity to deploy them effectively. Particularly concerning the understanding of large-scale naval and aerial warfare tactics and tactics prevalent at the time, Japan lagged significantly behind. The naval and aerial engagements of the Pacific War cannot be simplistically viewed as mere battles between aircraft carriers and warships. Through scientific planning, comparative analysis, and superior resource deployment capabilities, the US military correctly employed effective strategies and tactics such as **the 'leapfrog tactic'** and attacks on large-scale Japanese transport convoys, ultimately achieving disproportionately significant results with relatively minimal effort.

It is also worth noting that Xi Jinping studied early papers by the renowned **American** scholar Henry Kissinger, such as Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy (1957) and The Necessity of Choice: The Prospects for American Foreign Policy (1961). Through studying these works, Xi Jinping gained a profound understanding that the United States is a nation of learning and research, its military a force of learning and research, and its political think tanks composed of research-oriented statesmen closely attuned to practical realities. Amidst the shifting tides of international politics and military affairs, and against the backdrop of significant transformations in America's political, economic, and military prowess, the United States consistently possesses visionary think tanks and research-oriented figures capable of contemplating and proposing responses to new circumstances, formulating fresh strategies, and promptly adapting existing policies. Underestimating America's capacity for political, diplomatic, and military adaptation and its acute intellectual acuity, while clinging to outdated notions and approaches, relying on "assumptions" to address issues, would inevitably place one at a disadvantage in the evolving arena of international competition.

It is rather ironic to reflect now that Xi Jinping was reading Henry Kissinger's works in the barren cave dwellings of northern Shaanxi during the 1970s, when he was still a young intellectual in his late teens.

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Kissinger's works in the barren cave dwellings of northern Shaanxi as an educated youth not yet **twenty**. How times change: in **December 2016**

, Kissinger visited China. By then, Xi Jinping was the 63-year-old President of China, while Kissinger was a 93-year-old former US Secretary of State. As China's head of state, Xi's exchange with Kissinger – a seasoned and astute international statesman – to discuss the future of global politics and Sino-American relations is indeed a deeply resonant affair.

Indeed, much of the knowledge and information acquired through youthful reading and diligent study has since changed or diminished in significance. Yet the tireless spirit of learning, sound study methods, and critical thinking cultivated during one's youth endure throughout life, continuing to exert influence and play a role in subsequent stages.

One day in **2010**, I visited Xi Jinping at his home. After supper, he drew me into his study and pointed to the bookshelves, remarking "Look, Ping, the books you left behind are still here." **Indeed**, those volumes on military affairs and history remained quietly preserved on his shelves, though considerably weathered by time. The books I had brought with me during my rural placement were largely left behind when I departed Liangjiahe. I never imagined they would still be preserved decades later. My reason for leaving them behind was uncertainty about how long he might need to persevere in the arduous rural life of northern Shaanxi. Providing him with this intellectual sustenance would enable him to continue learning amidst the rigours of labour and work. I also noticed that these shelves held a large number of new books, some of considerable academic weight. I am certain that to this day, Xi Jinping maintains the study habits cultivated over forty years ago, continuing to read after handling his busy official duties and constantly drawing new spiritual nourishment from books.

Interview Team: Finally, could you summarise what characteristics enabled Xi Jinping to rise from an ordinary educated youth to become the leader of Liangjiahe Village?

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Lei Pingsheng: Xi Jinping's characteristics are very distinct. I believe four aspects stand out prominently.

First, a profound sense of mission. When interacting with Xi Jinping, one perceives this quality immediately. For an individual to mature and become a contributor to society, a sense of mission is paramount. During his seven years in the countryside, Xi gradually forged his life's ideal: to deliver tangible benefits for the common people. Two key pieces of evidence illustrate this sense of mission: Firstly, after years of hardship and tempering in Liangjiahe, Xi properly positioned himself. He regarded himself as a son of the yellow earth and approached his service to the people from this perspective. To this day, he repeatedly emphasises that everything we do is for the welfare of the people. Secondly, a profound sense of vigilance. Xi Jinping cherished the famous lines from Fan Zhongyan's "Record of the Yueyang Tower": "To worry before the world worries, and to enjoy after the world enjoys". His sense of foreboding was initially imposed by his environment. Amidst the fierce political struggles of the time, his father faced persecution, compelling Xi to worry about his family and his own future – concerns he inevitably grappled with. Through the hardships endured in Liangjiahe and the trust and inspiration he gained from the people of northern Shaanxi, his concerns gradually expanded to encompass the collective farm and the larger village. At this stage, he worried about the production and livelihoods of the entire collective, contemplating how to double grain yields. This marked a shift from narrowly personal "rejoicing in others' gains and grieving over one's own misfortunes" to a profound sense of responsibility for the interests of the masses.

Second, dialectical thinking. Xi Jinping habitually approaches issues from multiple angles, employing dialectical reasoning to scrutinise problems from various perspectives, cross-verifying insights rather than rigidly considering matters from a single viewpoint or assuming self-righteousness. This approach enables him to identify effective solutions.

Third, composure in adversity. Whether confronting major or minor matters, Xi Jinping maintains calm and composure, preserving emotional equilibrium. He has shared with me on several occasions his admiration for a passage by Zeng Guofan: "The more complex and the more opinions diverge, the greater the need for clarity of thought".

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and opinions are most divided, the more one must maintain clarity of mind and composure, striving earnestly to cultivate patience." Those who undertake great endeavours must possess a cool-headed disposition and strong self-control. Only then can they methodically analyse even the most urgent matters and identify the optimal solution. In my interactions with Xi Jinping, he has repeatedly discussed the relationship between IQ and EQ. He believes that while IQ is important, EQ is crucial, especially for those who undertake great endeavours.

Fourthly, he is keen on reading and adept at learning. I note that during his tenure as President of the Central Party School, Xi Jinping delivered numerous addresses on reading and learning. Some addressed why reading and learning should be strengthened, others discussed methods for reading and learning, while others specified what to read and study. He once stated "Only through diligence in learning can one advance. The Communist Party of China has relied on learning to reach where it is today, and it must inevitably rely on learning to move forward into the future." I know he spoke these words from the heart, drawing upon profound insights gained from his own experiences of reading and learning.

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Interviewee: Tao Haisu. In 1969, he was sent from Beijing's Tsinghua High School to Duanjiageta Brigade in Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province. In 1971, he was recruited as a cadre, ~~sing~~ successively as county Youth League ~~secretary and committee member~~. In February 1978, he was admitted to Peking University. After graduation, he worked at the Research Office of the Secretariat of the Central Committee. He is currently Executive Director for Asia and Director of the China subsidiary at Mercuria Energy Group.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 8 February 2017

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Interview Team: As a Beijing educated youth who was sent to Yanchuan County, when did you first meet Xi Jinping?

Tao Haisu: I was recruited from the village where I was sent down to become a county-level cadre in 1971. I recall

In 1972, as a member of the county-level work team stationed at Shangwen'anyi Brigade in Wen'anyi Commune, I participated in the eight-to-nine-month ideological education campaign. During that time, I heard that among the Beijing educated youth in Liangjiahe Brigade of this commune, there were the son of Xi Zhongxun and the two sons of Lei Yingfu, both of whom were performing well. This piqued my interest, as their fathers were legendary figures, and I was keen to get to know them.

Though they bore the stigma of being "**children of counter-revolutionary elements**," I paid it no heed. For I simply **could not believe that** men like Xi Zhongxun and Lei Yingfu **could be "anti-Party elements"**

() Before heading to the countryside, both Tsinghua High School and Tsinghua University were at the very heart of the **Cultural Revolution's vortex**. One day it was one figure being denounced, the next another — we witnessed countless instances of "**the banners on the city walls changing hands**". On one occasion, we attended a mass criticism session at the Workers' Stadium. As Jiang Qing spoke from the podium, she declared with venom: "Yu Qiuli is one of He Long's men." At that time, He Long had already been overthrown for "anti-Party activities," yet Yu Qiuli was seated on the podium that very day, just a few seats away from Jiang Qing (Yu was then involved in central leadership work). This left me utterly dumbfounded, feeling that their habit of casually labelling people was nothing short of child's play. Consequently, I paid no heed to their accusations of "anti-Party activities."

One day, I made time to visit them personally in Liangjiahe. In a dim, dilapidated cave dwelling in the village, all three of them happened to be present. At that time, most of the dozen or so educated youths in Liangjiahe had either enlisted or been recruited for work elsewhere. Several others who hadn't left were staying in Beijing and didn't come back. Only Xi Jinping and the Lei brothers remained in the village. Upon entering the cave dwelling, the first thing I noticed was

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piles of books stacked everywhere—on the heated bed, windowsills, and chests. During our conversation, I casually picked up the top volume from one stack, *The Communist Manifesto*, and leafed through it. Nearly every page margin was densely covered in neat annotations, and the title page bore the signature "Lei Yingfu." I was secretly amazed, thinking, "Are there Communist Party officials who read so diligently?" With officials like this, it makes perfect sense that their children's cave dwellings are piled high with books.

Interview Team: What impression did they make on you at the time?

Tao Haisu: My initial impression of the three of them was that they were all sincere and down-to-earth. Xi Jinping was only eighteen at the time, four and two years younger than the Lei brothers respectively, yet he appeared remarkably composed. He spoke with conviction, seldom agreeing with others without reservation, and was neither loud nor boastful. By the time I met Xi Jinping, he had already emerged from a period of uncertainty and hesitation that followed his initial arrival in the countryside, and his mindset had stabilised considerably.

From then on, despite the inconveniences of transport and telephony, I endeavoured to maintain contact with them as much as possible. Whenever I had the opportunity, I would visit them in Liangjiahe, and when they came to the county to conduct business, they would also drop by my office to see me. Leisure activities were very limited back then, so when I was with them, we would mostly engage in wide-ranging conversations. I recall several topics we discussed frequently: one was listening to them recount stories about their fathers. For instance, Xi Jinping once recounted how his father had handled ethnic minority affairs in Northwest China during the early years of liberation. Overcoming leftist tendencies, his father had rejected the wholesale application of mainland experiences. Instead, he adopted a policy combining strength with conciliation towards the upper echelons of Northwest ethnic minorities, achieving remarkable results. Mao Zedong praised this approach as surpassing even Zhuge Liang's seven captures of Meng Huo in ingenuity. Given his father's position at the time, such stories were utterly unheard of in society.

and thus felt quite novel to me. When Xi recounted these tales, I could sense his profound affection for his father.

Secondly, we exchanged "gossip". All of us ~~were~~ were keen ~~in~~ in politics, yet the nation's political life was profoundly abnormal at the time. People generally found little interest in what was propagated through newspapers and broadcasts, making "gossip" a vital channel for obtaining genuine information. Due to their family backgrounds and social connections, their sources of "gossip" were far richer than mine, so in this regard I listened more than I spoke. Much of the gossip at that time centred on discussions about Jiang Qing and satirical remarks about the Gang of Four. They were dissatisfied with the nation's political situation at the time. Although, due to their family circumstances, none of them could join the Party when I knew them, I often heard them express the view that one couldn't merely stop at discussion and complaint; one had to strive to join the Party and play an active role within it in purging corruption and reforming the times.

Thirdly, we exchanged insights from miscellaneous books we were reading. Many details of these discussions have faded, but I distinctly recall one occasion when we discussed The General History of the World, which we were both reading. As we talked about historical figures from medieval Europe, Lei Pingsheng became animated, passionately recounting the story of "Hammer-Wielding Ah Bing." That scene remains vivid in my memory to this day. On another occasion, we discussed stories of historical figures from China and abroad who persevered through adversity through personal struggle. After parting, Xi Jinping specifically wrote me a letter continuing this theme, quoting a line from the Book of Songs "The lofty mountain commands respect; the noble path invites emulation." •

I believe that what drew me to them back then, and what sustained our enduring mutual trust and friendship, was the common ground we shared and the many points of connection between us.

The first commonality was that, compared to Beijing, the rural areas of northern Shaanxi offered us a relatively politically relaxed environment where we could realise our personal potential. To be honest, none of us went to the countryside with lofty ideals of **"guarding against revisionism and opposing revisionism"** or of forging ourselves into red successors. Rather, we were

we had no choice, no other path to take. The fathers of Xi Jinping and the Lei brothers were all victims of the Party's brutal internal struggles, imprisoned at the time. Before heading to Yanchuan, Xi Jinping had already been designated for placement in a juvenile detention centre, though overcrowding meant he was temporarily held in limbo. Lei Rongsheng was then confined in a "study class for children of counter-

revolutionary elements, " stripped of his personal liberty. For their families and themselves, the Beijing environment was akin to enduring "bitter winds and frosts pressing in relentlessly"; moving to northern Shaanxi represented a measure of relief. My circumstances in Beijing were not as dire as theirs. My father was a lecturer at a military academy, though not a Party member, and our ancestors had been landlords. Consequently, I faced various forms of cold treatment and felt deeply unhappy. Before the *Down to the Countryside Movement*, there was an opportunity to enlist. I intended to apply, but the members of the Work Team stationed in our class mocked me in front of many classmates: " You want to join the army? Have you looked at your background?" Additionally, over a dozen factory recruitment spots in Beijing were snapped up by classmates with favourable backgrounds. Not a single child of cadres in our class was sent to the countryside. Thus, the only path left for me was rural placement. Upon arriving in northern Shaanxi, we all felt that the simple folk of northern Shaanxi—who, over thirty years after liberation, still referred to themselves as "**sufferers**"—opened their arms and hearts to us. In their eyes, a knowledge youth's worth was measured far more by their work ethic than their family background. Moreover, in that economically and culturally backward region, even the simplest knowledge—like distinguishing nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium—proved invaluable. Thus, despite enduring near-primitive hardship, we felt we'd entered a fresh realm brimming with possibilities.

The second commonality was our shared refusal to settle for mediocrity. We believed that life demanded purpose and achievement. This mindset, while influenced by the revolutionary heroism of our education, stemmed more profoundly from our studies. We yearned for colourful lives of historical figures who had made their mark, resonating with the Confucian ideals of "cultivating oneself, managing one's family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world" and "suffering before enjoying."

the welfare of the people before one's own."

The third commonality was our shared conviction that while one should aspire to lofty goals, one must begin with the small matters at hand. "How can one sweep the world if one cannot sweep one's own room?" A real concern at the time was university admission. None of us had completed secondary education, so we all dreamt of attending university to enrich our minds and spirits with modern knowledge. University admission, however, lay beyond our control at that time. In 1972, during the 'campaign, universities came to recruit students. Though nominally a system of mass recommendation was in place, one educated youth from Liangjiahe was recruited without the village leadership or Xi Jinping and his peers being informed—they only learned when he was about to leave. It later emerged that this youth's father held a senior position in Beijing's education system, and the recruitment quota for Liangjiahe had been 'assigned under the table'. I too applied for university several times, but as I had become a cadre, the county authorities would not release me. Our stance on this matter was clear: deep down, we all wished to leave; we did not regard "rooting ourselves in the **countryside for life**" as a mere slogan to be repeated. If, due to objective circumstances, we could not depart, it was no great tragedy. We should not become despondent or merely go through the motions, but rather strive to do our best with the tasks at hand. Guided by this mindset, before each of them went to university, they worked diligently in the brigade, all joining the Party. Lei Rongsheng became secretary of the brigade's Communist Youth League branch, Lei Pingsheng served as deputy director of the brigade's Revolutionary Committee, and Xi Jinping was appointed secretary of the brigade's Party branch.

Interview Team: Why did you recommend Xi Jinping for the social education work in Zhaojiahe?

Tao Haisu: In truth, selecting Xi Jinping for Zhaojihe's Socialist Education Campaign wasn't my first recommendation for him as a cadre. In early 1973, as deputy secretary of the county Communist Youth League committee, I proposed Xi Jinping to county Youth League secretary Liu Yunqing when they needed new cadres. Liu Yunqing replied "Not a chance! (Shaanxi dialect, meaning That's out of the question!) You're a landlord's son, I'm a peasant's son

If you bring in another 'black gang' offspring, what on earth would become of us'" It should be noted that class background was highly significant ~~in~~ at the time. Everyone's "background" was inherited from their family's classification during the earlier land reform period. Thus, even if one's parents had never worked the land, the background of one's ancestors became one's own. The Yancuan County Party Committee showed considerable courage in appointing someone of my background as Deputy Secretary of the County Communist Youth League Committee. If all the cadres in the County Youth League Committee had poor family backgrounds, it would indeed have been difficult to manage in the political climate of the time. So I fully understood our Secretary's concerns.

In the latter half of 1973, I became Secretary of the County Youth League Committee. Several months later, the Yancuan County Party Committee began began preparations to launch a second wave of socialist education campaigns in the following year, following the 1972 initiative targeting select production brigades. County-level cadres were to be selected to form work teams, operating under the unified command of the county committee to conduct on-site rectification in another group of production brigades. At that time, the Zhaojiakou Brigade of Fengjiaping Commune was one of the brigades designated for the second wave of deployments by the county Party committee. As Zhaojiakou had previously been the brigade where our county Youth League Committee had established a base, the county authorities tasked us with forming a work team to deploy there. I was appointed as the team leader and required one additional member, who could be either a full-time or part-time cadre. At this point, I again thought of Xi Jinping and discussed with him the possibility of the two of us forming a work team to carry out tasks at the Zhaojiahe Brigade. Xi Jinping remarked "~~he~~ League member, not a Party member." I replied, "That's not an issue; the county hasn't stipulated ~~he~~ every team ~~is~~ ~~independent~~." He then added with characteristic candour, "I lack prior experience in this kind of work." ~~I said~~ "No problem. As team leader, I'll take full responsibility for any issues. You just focus on the task at hand. Success will be credited to you; failure will be mine - " "

Two factors motivated my recommendation at the time. Firstly, from a practical standpoint, we needed capable personnel to effectively carry out the county Youth League Committee's assigned task of reorganising the brigade. Knowing Xi Jinping's character and insight, I believed he was up to the task. Secondly, considering his personal circumstances, I

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I was keen to create an opportunity for him to shine. By providing conditions ~~to~~ ~~d e m o n s t r a t e~~ his abilities, county and commune cadres would gain a better understanding of him, increasing his chances of being recommended for university or future leadership roles.

After the decision to conduct the Socialist Education Movement in Zhaojiahe was finalised, and following necessary meetings and training sessions at both county and commune levels, the various work teams began deploying to their respective brigades after the 1974 Spring Festival. As I was still tied up with some county affairs at the time, Xi Jinping went alone to Zhaojiahe first. He was twenty years old then. I arrived several days later.

Interview Team: From your perspective, how did he perform in his work at Zhaojiahe?

Tao Haili: Cao Guxi recounted in his interview the story of Xi Jinping repairing the latrine at Zhaojiahe, which is indeed factual. Xi Jinping once remarked that educated youths in the countryside had to overcome four major challenges; I believe the latrine challenge could be considered a fifth. The latrine outside the communal kiln at Zhaojiahe Brigade was once extremely rudimentary, filthy and foul-smelling, scarcely fit for human use. I arrived in Zhaojiahe a few days after Xi Jinping. Upon reaching the brigade headquarters, I saw him repairing that very toilet. I felt somewhat ashamed, for I had often stayed in the village and used this communal kiln, yet never once considered repairing the toilet.

That evening, Xi Jinping and I convened a meeting with the brigade's cadres and members in the communal kiln. It was the first time I heard him address the masses in his capacity as a cadre, and he spoke with remarkable clarity and coherence. Though slogans were ubiquitous in those days, his words were grounded in reality, devoid of empty rhetoric. Particularly striking was his command of a Shaanbei dialect more authentic than my own, which impressed me with his innate ability to connect with the people. Even then, I felt I could place complete trust in him to lead the rectification efforts here. As I had county-level Youth League duties to attend to, I couldn't remain in the village daily and could only visit periodically. Thus, throughout the seven or eight months of Zhaojiakou Brigade's socialist education campaign and rectification work

work, with Xi Jinping effectively shouldering the bulk of the responsibility. Moreover, I was transferred to serve as Party Secretary of Zhangjiahe Commune in June of that year. Xi Jinping single-handedly completed all subsequent tasks until the final inspection and acceptance (though naturally, under the guidance of the County Party Committee and Fengjiaping Commune Party Committee, with major matters still requiring commune approval). The Fengjiaping Commune was highly satisfied with the reorganisation work in Zhaojiahe and wished to retain Xi Jinping there after its conclusion. However, the Wenanyi Commune, where he had been sent to work, disagreed and recalled him to serve as Party branch secretary of Liangjiahe Brigade.

Xi Jinping's work in Zhaojiahe—organising literacy night schools, constructing dams, and his close ties with the masses—has been extensively recounted by the villagers you interviewed. I shall not repeat these details here, but wish to supplement with another aspect. At **that time, the Cultural Revolution** was at its peak with the **"Criticise Lin Biao and Confucius"** campaign. The so-called "socialist line education" emphasised class struggle as the guiding principle, promoting the notion that **"mass criticism drives mass action"** and that "without blocking the path to capitalism, we cannot take a step forward on the socialist road." Yet during our time in Zhaojiakou, Xi Jinping and I could find no evidence of "class enemies" or "capitalist tendencies." Consequently, throughout our joint tenure and Xi's subsequent independent leadership, we never convened a single criticism session nor engaged in struggle against any individual. The prevailing practice across rural areas at the time was that even in the absence of obvious signs of **"class struggle,"** whenever it became necessary to create an atmosphere of confrontation, individuals identified as landlords or rich peasants within the village would be singled out for public humiliation. These individuals invariably served as convenient targets for those engaged in **"class struggle."** Although Zhaojihe did have former wealthy peasants, they were all elderly and diligent workers. Xi Jinping and I felt it unreasonable to bully them without cause, so we never troubled them.

That year, according to the directives from above, the paramount task in class struggle was the **Criticise Lin Biao Campaign** Frankly, the common folk couldn't make head nor tail of all that "suppress Confucius, revere Marxism" and "arrest modern Confucian scholars" business.

could not fathom such concepts and held little interest in them. Their foremost concern remained increasing grain yields and filling their stomachs. Fortunately, another major slogan at the time was "Grasp revolution, promote production." Consequently, in our work within the brigade, I merely paid lip service to campaigns like "**Criticise Lin Biao and Confucius**," focusing our primary efforts on "promoting production."

One incident remains vivid in my memory. Xi Jinping, I, along with cadres and members from Zhaojiahe, attended a commune-wide criticism session at the commune headquarters. The re-education team from a neighbouring production brigade had brought several brigade cadres to be denounced. Their crime? "—neglecting women's work." At the meeting, these individuals stood with heads bowed on stage to receive criticism. Both Xi Jinping and I found this utterly incomprehensible. We remarked that neglecting women's affairs was, at worst, merely an internal contradiction among the people – did it truly warrant such harsh measures? I told Xi Jinping "I'd like to storm the stage and disrupt their criticism session" He replied: "Don't, don't." Of course, I was merely speaking in the heat of the moment.

During his time in Zhaojiahe, Xi Jinping encountered an incident that nearly made him the target of class struggle. An official from Wen'anyi Commune whom he knew well had come to Fengjiaping Commune on business and met Xi. Xi entrusted him to deliver a letter to Lei Pingsheng upon his return to Wen'anyi. Unexpectedly, this official opened the letter without authorisation. Upon discovering it contained discussions about Jiang Qing, he threatened to report Xi. This could have had extremely serious consequences. Within the circles of educated youths, discussing and mocking Jiang Qing was commonplace and no one took it seriously. However, local cadres had little understanding of the struggles at higher levels and lacked access to such information, so they viewed such matters as grave offences against the Cultural Revolution and the Party Central Committee. The incident was eventually quelled through the mediation of mutual acquaintances, who presented the cadre with two military overcoats—a rare commodity at the time. This episode stands as one of Xi Jinping's perilous

"humiliation of Huaiyin" in Xi Jinping's youth.

When Xi returned to Liangjiahe from Zhaojiahe, the Lei brothers had both left for university, making him the village's sole Beijing-born educated youth. Yet as Party branch secretary, his life grew busier and more fulfilling. In 1975, I attended the biogas demonstration meeting in Liangjiahe alongside leaders from various communes and production teams. The biogas system he'd established in the village was indeed well-organised. From my own experience, I knew biogas projects were notoriously difficult to implement. Fuel was scarce at the time, and the straw needed for biogas production was mostly burned for cooking and heating. The local soil was loose, and the villagers couldn't afford cement, making leakage issues particularly hard to resolve. In other communes (including , where I served as Party Secretary), promoting biogas met significant resistance. Most efforts were perfunctory, starting strong but fizzling out. Yet in their village , the biogas system genuinely lit lamps in some households. This clearly demonstrates the considerable effort Xi Jinping invested in this endeavour.

Xi Jinping cherishes his experience in the Zhaojiakou rectification team. When I visited him in

Fuzhou in 1992

in Fuzhou and again in 2008 in Beijing, I chatted with his secretary while waiting for him. Both secretaries mentioned that the leader had told them his time in Zhaojiakou, Yanchuan, participating in the re-education programme, marked his first step into the political arena. In 2009, marking the fortieth anniversary of the rural placement in Yanchuan, I revisited Zhaojiahe. I took photographs of the cave dwellings we once occupied, the present village landscape, the trees we planted together that had now grown into forests, and the villagers. Upon returning to Beijing, I informed Xi Jinping through his secretary that I wished to present him with the photographs and some local specialities. He replied: "Send the photographs, but the local products are unnecessary." In 2012, when he invited several Tsinghua ~~and~~ myself to dine together, he recounted with great emotion the details of his work in Zhaojiahe to his university friends. He even joked "I was just a League member back then, yet by the end of the reorganisation, I'd replaced an old Party branch secretary who'd joined in 1938 with a youngster."

Interview Team: Could you recount the events surrounding Xi Jinping's admission to Tsinghua University?

Tao Haisu: When Xi Jinping applied for university in 1975, he listed Tsinghua University as his first, second, and third choices. His admission process involved considerable twists and turns, as others have already recounted. However, securing a recommendation was one thing; subsequent hurdles remained, and whether he would ultimately gain admission was far from certain. No one could guarantee it. At this critical juncture, his decision to list Tsinghua as his sole choice demonstrated a distinctive character and philosophy regarding his own life trajectory. While this approach heightened the uncertainty of his university prospects, his confidence stemmed from the fact that continuing his work in the countryside if admission proved impossible held little significance for him. Unlike many who viewed rural life as bleak and pitiful, grateful for any chance to leave, he felt no need to be choosy. After seven years of hardship, he had forged bonds with the villagers—people as dear as family, confidants who understood him deeply. He had poured his heart and soul into work that seemed endless, consuming his every thought. What did it matter if he couldn't leave? When he was approved for university admission and the villagers of Liangjiahe bid him a tearful farewell, he even told them, "Perhaps I should stay and continue working here . . ." I believe those words came straight from the heart.

Before Xi Jinping's departure, I happened to be attending a meeting in the county seat. We bid farewell at the county Party committee guesthouse, where I presented him with a notebook. As I watched his figure recede in his faded old military uniform, I felt a touch of wistfulness, yet greater joy at his embarking upon a new chapter in life. Whatever lay ahead, I was certain he was well prepared.

Interview Team: Did you stay in touch when he was at university?

Tao Haisu: In the winter of 1977, I took the first university entrance examination after the restoration of the Gaokao and was admitted to Peking University's Department of Economics. The following spring, shortly after enrolling at Peking University, I went to Tsinghua University to find Xi Jinping. He took me to a restaurant near the campus in Wudaokou for a meal and a chat. At that time, the nation was in a critical period of "**rectifying the wrongs and restoring order.**" The recently concluded 11th National Congress of the Communist Party of China had formally declared the end of **the Cultural Revolution**, yet certain erroneous policies and guidelines formed during that period were still being upheld. Our lengthy conversation that day centred largely on the major events unfolding across the nation, and we also touched upon his post-graduation plans. He made it clear that he had no intention of pursuing technical work related to his chemical engineering specialisation. Instead, he intended to enter the political arena, continuing the aspirations he had formed long ago in the rural north of Shaanxi Province – to engage in endeavours that could more profoundly influence the destinies of ordinary people.

Wu Xiju, Xi Jinping's classmate at Tsinghua University who later served as mayor of Weinan City in Shaanxi Province, met me during that 2012 dinner with Xi Jinping. We have kept in close contact ever since. He once recounted to me certain incidents involving Xi Jinping and his classmates. They initially shared a large class, which later split into two smaller sections. Xi served as the propaganda commissioner of the Party branch in one section, while Wu was the organisational commissioner. Wu remarked that Xi led an exceptionally frugal life at Tsinghua. Over their three-plus years as classmates, Wu never once saw Xi wearing new clothes, which struck him as remarkable, given that Wu himself came from a rural background and occasionally wore new garments. He also mentioned that during his university years, Xi Jinping extensively read political and economic literature beyond his specialisation. At that time, Wu Xiju had brought Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* from home to campus. Upon seeing it, Xi Jinping borrowed it from him, and later Wu Xiju gifted him the book. He particularly emphasised that Xi Jinping demonstrated remarkable political maturity and steadiness. At that time, Tsinghua University was at the epicentre of political strife, **with** ~~rising~~ tight control over the institution. During the **April Fifth Movement of 1976**—a protest commemorating Premier Zhou Enlai and denouncing **the Gang of Four**—several Beijing classmates in their year ~~of~~

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poems about Tiananmen Square. Xi Jinping commanded considerable respect among his Beijing classmates. He engaged extensively with those students, sympathising with and supporting their views while advising them to exercise caution in their tactics and protect themselves. Wu Xiju was responsible for the subsequent investigation into this incident. Precisely because Xi Jinping cooperated effectively, those students received strong protection, suffered no harm, and successfully weathered the storm. Following this incident, the Gang of Four launched a new round of turmoil under the banner of "Criticising Deng Xiaoping & Countering the Rightist Wind of Revising History". Writing groups were established at all levels within Tsinghua University to organise the composition of articles criticising Deng. When Wu Xiju sought Xi Jinping's views, Xi immediately declined participation, citing his lack of aptitude for writing as an excuse.

Interview Team: After serving as Geng Biao's secretary for some time, Xi Jinping decided to work in Zhengding. Do you know why he chose to go to the grassroots level at that time?

Tao Haisu: In early 1982, as I was nearing graduation from Peking University, Xi Jinping telephoned me one day and invited me to his residence. He informed me of his decision to return to the grassroots and work in the countryside. He mentioned that when he had discussed his plans with Geng Biao, the latter had attempted to dissuade him, suggesting that while grassroots experience was valuable, he could also gain it through service in the field army. Nevertheless, Xi remained resolute in his choice to work locally. Xi explained to me that his decision to undertake grassroots work in rural areas stemmed primarily from two considerations. Firstly, the nation had entered an era centred on economic development. Working locally would afford him broader exposure than military service, bringing him closer to the realities of people's livelihoods and circumstances, thereby providing more comprehensive training. Secondly, having spent seven years in northern Shaanxi, he drew his richest accumulation of knowledge and practical experience from rural life. Moreover, the countryside was now at the forefront of reform, where his strengths could be best utilised.

After sharing these thoughts, he added a few words that remain etched in my memory to this day.

He said:

"This assignment, if executed well, may lead to significant future achievements. Should it prove less successful, I shall simply serve the people at the grassroots level—which is no small thing either." Hearing these words, I was deeply moved, though not in the least surprised. Those choosing the path of public service understand that while they aspire to advance steadily, shoulder greater responsibilities, and achieve significant accomplishments, whether these aspirations are realised depends not solely on personal effort but also on various external circumstances and opportunities. It is a path fraught with uncertainty. At that time, the decade-long turmoil had devastated the cadre ranks and higher education, leaving a gap in leadership succession. A cohort of children of senior officials gained rapid promotion through special channels, becoming what were termed 'rocket cadres'. Compared to working at the grassroots level, this seemed a path with less uncertainty, offering a swift ascent to positions of influence. Yet Xi Jinping declined to take shortcuts. He recognised that although he had served as a village Party branch secretary, his experience remained fundamentally grassroots-level. His training and perspective were not yet sufficiently comprehensive. Starting at the county level would lay a more solid foundation. Though this path held considerable uncertainty, it once again demonstrated Xi Jinping's extraordinary approach to life choices and self-direction. For regardless of the prospects on the political ladder, the privilege of serving the people at the grassroots level could never be taken away. With this foundation secured, and since serving the people was his own joy, the uncertainty of his personal advancement became insignificant.

Seeing his resolve to go was firm, I said to him, "Very well then. Since you've already decided to go, I'll bring someone along to brief you on the situation regarding rural reform." The person I referred to was Deng Yingtao, a classmate of mine at Peking University. At the time, he was a member of the Rural Development Research Group, which was primarily composed of university students who had been sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. They had conducted extensive research across rural areas nationwide and had submitted many valuable proposals to the central government. After Xi agreed, Deng Yingtao and I cycled from the university to Xi's home the following day. That day, Deng and Xi found themselves in lively conversation. Deng analysed the situation of rural reform and offered numerous suggestions, which Xi found helpful.

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and offered numerous suggestions. Xi found the discussion highly instructive. Thirty years later, in 2012, when Xi and I met, he recalled this very incident. Deng Yingtao had recently passed away, and Xi expressed his regret, telling me he had read books written by Deng.

Shortly after Xi Jinping went to Zhengding, I graduated from Peking University and was assigned to work in the Theoretical Research Group of the Research Office of the Central Secretariat. Several months later, I recall it being around the turn of summer into autumn, Xi Jinping returned to Beijing from Zhengding on official business and once again invited me to his residence. We discussed his work in Zhengding. He appeared in high spirits, recounting various matters concerning Zhengding with evident enthusiasm. Though his tenure there had been brief, he had already conceived numerous plans to advance Zhengding's economic and cultural development. One such initiative involved constructing a Rongguo Mansion in Zhengding, and his return to Beijing that time was connected to advancing this project.

In 1992, when I visited Xi Jinping in Fuzhou, he recounted an incident from his tenure in Zhengding. Shortly after assuming the role of Zhengding County Party Secretary, Du Runsheng, Director of the Rural Policy Research Office at the Central Secretariat, invited three county Party secretaries to a discussion at his office. All three were young cadres who had been sent from Beijing to work in rural areas. At the meeting, each reported on the economic reforms in their respective counties and shared their perspectives on rural work. That very evening, an acquaintance telephoned Xi Jinping to relay that after hearing the reports, Old Du remarked "Young Xi's presentation was the most down-to-earth." This came as no surprise to me whatsoever, for during our time working together in the rural areas of northern Shaanxi, I had observed that Xi Jinping always approached his duties with steady pragmatism. He **disdained** flashy, superficial methods like "~~花架子~~" or "three grand gestures," preferring instead to thoroughly grasp the actual circumstances and proceed step by step.

In 2012, over dinner, he recounted an incident: a county Party leader from another region had brought a delegation to Zhengding to exchange reform experiences. All members of the delegation were dressed in suits and ties, and during discussions with Zhengding officials, they urged the local cadres to adopt the same attire. Xi Jinping did not take up this suggestion.

such a suggestion, for while he had no objection to wearing suits, he considered it a superficial matter that should not be enforced uniformly as a reform measure. He also recounted an amusing anecdote related to this: when he first arrived in Zhengding as deputy county party secretary, the secretary was a veteran cadre with extensive experience whom Xi held in high regard. At that time, Xi often wore a military overcoat and a flat cap. On one occasion, the veteran secretary invited him to his home, where they sat drinking on the heated bed. The secretary remarked: "You're quite good in every respect, but that **cap...**" Xi, recognising this was not a matter of principle, readily accepted the advice and ceased wearing the cap.

A friend of mine, Lü Rizhou, who was then Party Secretary of Yuanping County in Shanxi, conducted research in Zhengding during the 1980s. He recently told me that the cadres and masses he encountered during his visit spoke highly of Xi Jinping. Some elderly farmers remarked, "Jinping is our farmers' son," while younger people said, "Jinping treats us like brothers." Lü Rizhou had many discussions with Xi Jinping in Zhengding. He recounted that Xi once remarked to him: "We have read many books, but they contain much superficial knowledge. Only by engaging with the masses can we distil away the superficiality and gain genuine understanding." These words have left a lasting impression on Lü Rizhou to this day.

That shall suffice for today. Finally, I wish to add that though my friendship with Xi Jinping has spanned decades, my close encounters have captured only a few fragments of his life journey. Yet even from these limited glimpses, I have genuinely sensed that serving the people through tangible deeds remains his unwavering conviction. For Xi Jinping, this is neither a simplistic slogan nor some indoctrinated doctrine. It is a conviction that welled up naturally and became ingrained in his very being during those seven years in northern Shaanxi, forged through hand-in-hand struggle with ordinary folk who toiled "with their faces to the yellow earth and their backs to the **sky**," striving merely to survive. For him, this is not a bargaining chip for personal advancement, but a profound joy in life that no other interest can replace. It must be acknowledged that Xi Jinping's seven years in northern Shaanxi

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This period coincided with a singular chapter in our nation's history – an era where truth was inverted and virtue distorted. Yet amidst the barren soil of Yanchuan, a nationally designated impoverished county, this same period witnessed the emergence of Xi Jinping, Sun Lizhe, Lu Yao, Shi Tiesheng, and other young souls who refused mediocrity. This was not the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, nor the outcome of ultra-leftist dogma or utopian theories. Throughout China's history, whether in times of prosperity or decline, no matter how absurd the circumstances, there have always been benevolent physicians who healed the afflicted, and upright officials who **felt shame at receiving salaries** while their people suffered. This resilience forms the very backbone that has sustained ~~enduring~~ vitality. When we now recall the footsteps of these young men, it is not to extol illusory slogans or movements, but to acknowledge the spirit of those who, amidst hardship and adversity, tenaciously sought and realised the meaning of life – the spirit of "a man should strive to be strong".

When I met Xi Jinping in Beijing in 2008 I told him "Having known you for so many years, I wish to write about the stories I know concerning you." He smiled and replied, "It's not quite time to pass final judgement on me yet." I fully understood his words. Xi Jinping maintains a low profile, never seeking excessive publicity. During an interview in Fujian, he mentioned having declined roughly a hundred interview requests previously. Moreover, with his current heavy responsibilities and daily management of countless affairs, recounting his story is hardly an urgent matter. Nevertheless, I believe that the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee's Decision called for "developing socialist democratic politics." Allowing the public to gain a deeper understanding of our leaders—not merely seeing them deliver grand speeches on stage, but also learning about their joys, sorrows, and inner worlds—should be an inherent part of socialist democratic politics. Therefore, I consider the Central Party School's series of interview transcripts to be a highly meaningful endeavour.

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Years of Insight
Knowledge is Political Study
Thoughts on Recent History
I wish Peace
Flat Overall Chronicle
Chronicles
Chronicles
Chronicles
Commencement
Governance
Beginning State

Interviewee: Ai Ping, born August 1953, student at Tsinghua University High School in Beijing. In January 1969, travelled with Xi Jinping on the same special train for educated youth to Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province, to work in the countryside. Entered university in September 1973joined the Communist Party in June 1977; began working at the International Department of the CPC Central Committee in October 1977, serving successively as Deputy Director, Director, Director of the Africa Bureau, Director of Bureau I, and Deputy Minister. Appointed member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the 12th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in 2013.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, et al.

Interview Date: 9 December 2016

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

Interview Team: Comrade Ai Ping, you and General Secretary Xi Jinping travelled together on the same special train for educated youth to Yanchuan County. You both experienced the transformative era and the hardships of rural life. Could you share your recollections of your time in Yanchuan?

Ai Ping: Indeed, I departed Beijing on 13 January 1969, travelling alongside Xi Jinping on the same special train for educated youth to Shaanxi Province. We were both assigned to Yanchuan County: he to Liangjiahe Production Brigade, Wen'anyi Commune; I to Bajia Production Team, Erbjia Brigade, Guanzhuang Commune.

Xi Jinping and I are the same age. His father, Xi Zhongxun, had been persecuted by Kang Sheng and others since the early 1960s, being sent down to Luoyang for investigation and subjected to criticism during the Cultural Revolution. This also implicated his relatives and children, tearing families apart.

My family faced a similar **fate**. My father, Ai Zhisheng, had served as Deputy Party Secretary of Tsinghua University before the **Cultural Revolution**. At that time, both Peking University and Tsinghua were regarded as emblems of the "**bourgeois** educational line." All members of Tsinghua's university Party committee were branded as "**gang members**." My father became one of the first to be overthrown in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, labelled a "capitalist road-walker."

In those years, we were all deemed "children of gangsters," reviled as "**gang members**" later euphemistically termed "children who could be educated."

Following Chairman Mao's "supreme directive" that "**educated youth should go to the countryside to receive re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants**," our cohort of secondary school students boarded special trains bound for northern Shaanxi to join the rural settlement movement. By then, our nation's economy teetered on the brink of collapse. With schools "**suspended for revolutionary activities**," universities halting admissions, and factories ceasing recruitment, sending students to "**settle in the countryside**" represented a last-resort solution.

Our cohort boarded the special train at Beijing Station. Some recall that the platform...

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

Parents seeing them off and the educated youths in the carriage were all in tears. Later, when Xi Jinping recalled that day, he said that while everyone else was crying, he had actually smiled. I understand this completely, for I empathise deeply—at that time, the situation at home could scarcely have been worse, and leaving Beijing actually eased the mental strain.

Interview Team: What were the conditions like on the journey to Yanchuan? How many days did it take you to reach northern Shaanxi?

Ai Ping: I recall the journey took five days, and we should have reached the village on 17 January.

Trains were very slow back then. It took over a day just to reach Tongchuan, where we stayed overnight. That consumed two days. On the third day, we boarded military trucks from Tongchuan bound for Yan'an. The journey spanned over 240 kilometres. Today, with expressways, it might take just over two hours, but back then it was all gravel roads. The trucks moved slowly, taking nearly the entire day. Upon reaching Yan'an, our cohort of educated youths stayed another night. On the fourth day, we boarded trucks again, travelling first to Fengjiaping Commune for lunch. Afterwards, we trekked over a mountain on foot to reach Guanzhuang Commune, where we lodged for another night. It was only on the fifth day after leaving Beijing that we finally arrived at Bajia Village.

The Guan Zhuang Commune where I was stationed later produced a renowned educated youth writer named Shi Tiesheng. He penned a novel titled My Distant Qingping Bay. In truth, the valley where Guan Zhuang Commune was situated was called Qingping Valley, and the village where he was stationed was Guan Jiazhuang. He transformed Qingping Valley into the name of a village—Qingping Bay—using it as the backdrop to describe his life in the village.

The most indelible memory of my journey from Beijing to northern Shaanxi was the mountain we crossed before reaching Guan Zhuang. At fifteen, barely five feet tall, that mountain seemed to pierce the heavens. Upon reaching the summit, my gaze swept across the boundless Loess Plateau—a landscape of barren, rugged hills, dissected by ravines

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy and barren ridges, stretching all the way to the horizon. Recalling the arduous journey of the past few days, I felt I had travelled a great distance from Beijing, as if I had arrived in a completely different, unfamiliar world. My feelings were very complex.

Interview Team: Today, fifteen-year-olds study in bright classrooms without worries about basic necessities. You were also fifteen when sent to Shaanbei for rural placement. Could you describe what hardship in the countryside meant for a fifteen-year-old?

Meaning for a 15-year-old youth?

AiPing: I attended Tsinghua University High School. Over 200 students from our cohort were assigned to Yanchuan County. assigned to Yanchuan County. A week later, another group followed, so in total over 300 students from Tsinghua Affiliated High School

assigned to Yanchuan County. There were over 1,300 Beijing educated youth in Yanchuan County, distributed across six communes including Yongping, Fengjiaping, Guanzhuang, and Yuju, and further placed in production brigades with relatively better living conditions. The Beijing educated youth assigned to Yanchuan all hailed from Haidian District. Besides Tsinghua Affiliated High School, others included Qinghe Middle School, No. 57 Middle School, No. 20 Middle School, No. 19 Middle School, and the 81st School. Many students from these schools found themselves in the same village as friends, classmates, or even siblings, enabling mutual support.

Xi Jinping, however, was less fortunate. Though he had attended both primary and secondary school at the 81st School, the Gang of Four had disbanded the institution during the Cultural Revolution, dispersing most pupils to other schools. Consequently, when Xi was sent to the countryside, he lacked the network of classmates and friends to provide mutual support. He was unfamiliar with students from other schools, necessitating the process of getting to know one another anew amidst the harsh realities of rural life and arduous labour. For a fifteen-year-old youth like him, this proved genuinely challenging.

Both Xi Jinping and I were among the youngest of that cohort of educated youth, having both attended junior secondary school for only six years

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

and had completed one less year of primary education than others. Thus, we were a year younger than our peers, sent to the countryside at just fifteen. Compared to the eighteen- or nineteen-year-olds, or those in their twenties, we were much smaller and frailer. Yet we had to accept this reality and embark upon an unfamiliar and arduous existence.

Interview Team: Like Xi Jinping, you both studied diligently in your spare time from labour and later returned to Beijing for higher education. Could you describe how the educated youth studied back then and how they managed to attend university?

Ai Ping: After two years of labour in the village, I was transferred to work at the county's subsidiary foodstuffs company. My duties involved travelling to villages across the county to collect pigs, sheep, and eggs, covering roughly three-quarters of all villages. This gave me a fairly comprehensive understanding of the entire Yanchuan County.

Among the educated youth I encountered, reading habits broadly fell into four categories: some, influenced by the Cultural Revolution's "education is useless" doctrine, abandoned reading altogether; Others embraced the notion that "mastering maths, physics and chemistry will take you anywhere in the world," favouring science-related books; Some read Marxist-Leninist texts and Mao Zedong's Selected Works, which were popular at the time; Others immersed themselves in literature, history and philosophy. Those who genuinely loved and knew how to read would explore diverse subjects based on their interests, engaging in extensive reading and learning. Xi Jinping was an avid reader;

when he went to work in the countryside, he brought many books with him. Numerous educated youths recounted his reading habits. Later, when Tsinghua University recruited students from Yanchuan, he was recommended for admission. Xi spent nearly the longest period among the educated youth in Yanchuan, almost seven years, before finally entering Tsinghua in the autumn of 1975.

During our university years, we were so-called "workers, peasants and soldiers students". In 1970,¹¹

"Directive on the Report Regarding the Pilot Recruitment of Students by Peking University and Tsinghua University." Subsequently, other universities gradually began recruiting students as well. This provided us with a pivotal opportunity to alter the course of our lives.

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy opportunity to alter the course of our lives.

Many cadres at Tsinghua University were purged at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. By ~~and~~ 1970, the university's veteran cadres had largely been "rehabilitated"; though not fully reinstated to their former posts, they were no longer labelled "capitalist roaders". For instance, Liu Bing, formerly First Deputy Secretary of the Tsinghua University Party Committee, was rehabilitated, alongside several other veteran cadres who resumed their duties. These individuals possessed deep familiarity with education and understood pedagogical principles. They advocated for education to be conducted according to educational laws, maintaining stable teaching order while prioritising the teaching capabilities of faculty and the learning abilities of students.

Enrolment in higher education at that time required passing through four stages: voluntary application, mass recommendation, leadership approval, and university review. For Xi Jinping to gain admission to Tsinghua University in 1975 was no small feat; officials at the brigade, commune, county committee, and Tsinghua administrative levels all took considerable risks.

From this perspective, the fate of us educated youth was inextricably linked to the nation's developmental trajectory. Without the "Down to the Countryside" policy, we would not have been sent to the rural areas. Without the university admissions policy, we would not have been so "fortunate" to gain entry to higher education.

I entered university in 1973. At the time of recommendation, I was employed at the Yanchuan County Foodstuffs Company and was nominated by my workplace. Xi Jinping, being in the countryside, was recommended by his production brigade.

My impression is that during admissions, the central government showed considerable consideration towards Beijing educated youth in northern Shaanxi. I recall that in 1972 and 1973, Yanchuan County received several dozen places each year for university and technical college admissions. Such substantial annual quotas were allocated specifically to accommodate Beijing educated youth.

Many educated youths never put down their books and kept studying. As soon as the revolution succeeded, my father wrote to me urging me to persevere with my studies, saying that without knowledge in the twentieth century, one could not contribute to the nation or society.

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

Interview Team: Did you hear stories about Xi Jinping during your time in Yanchuan?

Ai Ping: Although we were both Beijing educated youth sent to Yanchuan in the same cohort, we were not in the same commune nor students at the same school. Before I began working at the county level, my social circle consisted solely of fellow villagers and educated youth from Tsinghua University High School in neighbouring villages. On 18th March 1971, I was recruited to work at the county's non-staple food company and left the village. Upon arriving in the county, I began interacting with educated youths from other schools, including those from Wen'anyi Commune, and heard some stories about Xi Jinping. Among the educated youths I met during this period, two were from the Wen'anyi Brigade of Wen'anyi Commune: one named Jin Jing and the other named Shu Zhan. Jin Jing had known Xi Jinping for a longer period. Shu Zhan and I entered university in the same year, both attending Beijing Foreign Studies University.

Jin Jing and Shu Zhan were sent to the Wenyanyi Brigade, which was the seat of the Wenyanyi Commune. Xi Jinping's Liangjiahe village belonged to the Wenyanyi Commune. Wenyanyi held a market day every five days. When Xi Jinping and the other educated youths from Liangjiahe needed to go to market, they would usually head to the nearest one at Wenyanyi to buy daily necessities and such. Occasionally, when Xi and other educated youths had business elsewhere, the distance and poor transport meant they couldn't return to Liangjiahe before nightfall. They would then stay with fellow educated youths in Wen'anyi Brigade. Gradually, Jin Jing and Shu Zhan came into frequent contact with Xi Jinping and grew familiar with him. Meanwhile, like Xi Jinping, Jin Jing had participated in the Socialist Education Movement despite being stationed in the village. Xi Jinping and Tao Haisu were assigned to the Zhaojiakou commune, while Jin Jing was in the Hejiakou commune. Their shared experiences provided them with much common ground.

I heard Xi Jinping's story from Jin Jing, and what left a particularly deep impression was his admission to the Party. At that time, Liangjiahe Village had several prominent family households, and there were conflicts among the villagers, especially over the distribution of grain. Liang Yuming, then the brigade Party secretary, recognised Xi Jinping's qualities and the villagers' trust in him

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

. Xi replied, "I'm not even a Party member—how could I be secretary?" Liang responded, "One can be developed into a member!" After a vote at the Party branch meeting (), the proposal was submitted to the commune. Following several rounds of bureaucratic hurdles, a letter of inquiry and external investigation were processed. At the time of the external investigation, Xi Zhongxun had not yet been "rehabilitated" and remained reassigned at the Luoyang Refractory Materials Factory. The factory issued a supporting document stating, in essence, that "Xi Zhongxun's circumstances do not affect his children's admission to the Party." Thus, the external investigation was completed, and Xi Jinping joined the Party.

This seemed utterly inconceivable at the time. It can be said that every stage of the admission process was critical; had any official been rigidly adhering to the so-called "political standards" of the era, it could have derailed Xi Jinping's membership. This incident also reveals that both Xi Zhongxun during his reassignment in Luoyang and Xi Jinping during his placement in Liangjiahe enjoyed exceptionally strong grassroots support. Without such backing, without the people's endorsement, and without the various workarounds and flexible approaches that were still feasible at the time, his admission into the Party would have been impossible under those political circumstances.

Later, I learnt from other educated youths that he had attended Tsinghua University. While studying at Beijing Foreign Studies University, I would typically return to my parents' home at Tsinghua on weekends. On one occasion, I even saw him returning to campus with classmates and teachers outside the university's west gate.

His work establishing biogas facilities in Liangjiahe occurred after I had left Yanchuan County; I too learned of it through other Beijing educated youths.

Interview Panel: How did the experience of being sent down to northern Shaanxi influence your generation of educated youths?

AiPing: From my personal perspective, the rural placement provided me with profound insight into China's countryside. Without this experience, I would never have grasped China's national conditions, nor would I have...

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

Understanding why China is in this state. At that time, China was still largely an agrarian nation. Before the reform and opening-up, over 80% of the population lived in rural areas. Without understanding how this 80% lived, one cannot claim to have a profound grasp of the national situation.

I was born within the grounds of Tsinghua University, a place that represented an ivory tower in China. When we were young, the path '**designed**' for us by Tsinghua's president, Jiang Nanxiang, was this: ~~kindergarten~~, primary school, secondary school, and university within the Tsinghua campus, ultimately becoming a 'red engineer'. It was a path devoid of hardship, rather uneventful. Had it not been for my experience in the countryside, Jiang Nanxiang's design would have been a seamless progression – a life that would have been smooth but rather unremarkable. Following such a path would undoubtedly have been easy, free from trials and tribulations, and likely to yield some achievements. Yet it would have deprived me of countless opportunities to understand the nation, its people, its ethnicity, and thereby the world. This is my overall understanding of my time working in the fields of northern Shaanxi.

We responded to Chairman Mao's call to go to the countryside. Chairman Mao demanded that "educated youth go to the countryside to receive re-education by the poor and lower-middle

peasants." But what exactly was this "re-education"? Could the peasants truly educate these educated youth from the cities? It was certainly not the kind of education most people imagined. The educated youth did indeed receive profound education, but what exactly educated them? It may not have been the so-called poor and lower-middle peasants or the Revolutionary Committees of the time, but rather the reality of life itself, the very fabric of rural existence.

Though I spent only a little over two years in the village, those two years taught me a fundamental truth of life: those accustomed to privilege will never comprehend the hardships of existence, even in matters as basic as clothing, food, shelter, and daily necessities. Under the circumstances of that era, the most fundamental aspects of rural life were profoundly difficult—including eating, drinking water, lighting fires for cooking, and illuminating one's surroundings, among other things. In the city, though life was not as affluent or convenient as it is today, one at least need not worry about the most fundamental necessities. Turning on the tap yielded water; cooking was done with honeycomb coal... Things that were natural and taken for granted in the city

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy were incredibly difficult in the countryside.

When we first arrived, the state did make some provisions: we received two hundred and forty yuan in settlement allowance and a year's worth of cloth coupons. With that two hundred and forty yuan, we could buy a trunk – trunks were cheap back then – and still have enough left over for a set of outer garments, plus roughly six months' worth of food expenses. We arrived **in January**. From **January** until the autumn harvest, the state supplied grain to the educated youth, with each receiving a monthly ration of 45 jin. This was a very high standard; back in Beijing, my ration had been around 30 jin.

Our first year in northern Shaanxi was reportedly an unusually bountiful harvest, yet my entire annual income amounted to just 260 jin of raw grain and six yuan. This meant my monthly grain ration for the following year fell below 22 jin, while my monthly cash income equated to a mere fifty fen. Within the collective economy, this figure essentially represented the economic circumstances of our entire village, indeed of farmers across Yanchuan County. I have recounted this experience to many foreigners, illustrating the starting point from which China's reform and opening-up commenced.

Looking back now, life in northern Shaanxi at that time largely remained within the natural economy phase, with little money circulating among the common folk. They relied on growing their own cotton, spinning their own yarn, weaving their own cloth, and making their own shoes. The only item I recall having to purchase was kerosene for lighting. This was my firsthand experience of rural life in northern Shaanxi.

Under the influence of the Cultural Revolution people's minds were saturated with the mantra that "class struggle must be emphasised year after year, month after month, day after day." Yet upon arriving in northern Shaanxi, I realised there was scarcely any class struggle to speak of. The region was profoundly impoverished; the village contained no landlords or wealthy peasants, only two middle-peasant households. It struck me deeply that the greatest contradiction at that time was not class struggle, but the conflict between humanity and nature.

I recall it vividly: on my first day working in the fields, it was springtime and we were delivering manure to the land.

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

a round trip of nearly five li, which I had to make four times that day. By the end, the able-bodied folk had long finished and gone home, while I was utterly exhausted. Darkness fell, and I felt both fearful and weary. Then a fellow villager, a man of forty or fifty whose family were middle peasants, approached me. Seeing my state he said "Enough of this. Put yours in my basket. I'll carry it up for you. ~~If there and wait for me.~~" After delivering his load he returned ~~I suggested~~ "Shall we sit here and rest a while?" He then explained that this work wasn't particularly arduous; harvesting wheat in summer and planting buckwheat were far more gruelling tasks than carrying manure.

From that very first day, I realised that the abstract notions of "class struggle" in my mind bore little resemblance to the reality of northern Shaanxi. People had no clear understanding of how the socialist or capitalist paths manifested in rural life; instead, they faced the most immediate question daily: how to survive in these conditions. That was the stark truth of China at the time! Only by immersing oneself in the countryside could one witness this reality and grasp its essence.

Our experience of being sent down to Shaanbei enabled our cohort of educated youths to decipher the great tome of "life," the great tome of "**rural China**," and the great tome of "**reality**." Though ~~books~~ bore no written words, they proved far more profound than any printed text and exerted a far greater educational influence upon us.

Interview Team: When recalling his years as an educated youth, Xi Jinping once candidly remarked that his time working in the fields of northern Shaanxi taught him "what practicality truly means."

How do you interpret this statement?

Ai Ping: Only by engaging with reality can one grasp what "practicality" truly means. To illustrate with a simple example, take the matter of "fuel wood". In the south, where vegetation is abundant, gathering firewood is remarkably convenient; in the northeast, with its extensive forests, fuel wood is scarcely in short supply. Yet in northern Shaanxi, securing fuel wood presented a significant practical challenge, forcing villagers to rely on burning grass and shrubbery. This is precisely why Xi Jinping led the villagers in establishing biogas systems back then – to

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy address the local farmers' struggle to secure firewood.

Another example concerns the practical difficulties of feeding oneself. The grain supplied to us from the state granaries was unprocessed. After purchasing it, we had to grind the grain into flour using a millstone, a task many of us had never encountered before. Better-off villages had livestock, using donkeys to turn the millstones, but our village had only three donkeys, which were already stretched thin with farm work. Consequently, we had to use human power. Grinding ten or twenty jin of grain would take one or two hours.

Initially, our village had ten educated youths: six boys and four girls. We ate from a communal kitchen, taking turns to cook. That first year, we subsisted on state-allocated grain, yet it was perpetually insufficient. We ate the bran along with the grains, yet still went hungry. We learned from the villagers, foraging for wild greens, elm seeds, locust flowers, and bitter vegetables. Eventually, the girls could endure it no longer and demanded separate meals. They argued that sharing meals with us boys meant enduring a diet of chaff and vegetables, whereas the 45 jin of grain allocated to them by the state was sufficient.

Soil conservation was poor back then. Rain triggered flash floods, sending over a metre of water surging down the river. Muddy torrents carrying branches and debris silted up our water well. The river water was undrinkable, thick with yellow loess slurry. During the rainy season, days of persistent drizzle left the mountain firewood perpetually damp. Even when gathered, it wouldn't dry out for burning. The incessant rain also made grinding grain impossible. Thus, during those days, securing food became a monumental challenge.

These experiences during our rural placement profoundly affected us educated youth raised in cities. Such living conditions taught us that life was far from the ease we had imagined. Naturally, the term **jian** can be interpreted in many ways. From my personal experience and understanding, these tangible, genuinely existing circumstances constituted reality—neither conjured by subjective imagination nor readily altered by whim.

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

Life in the countryside offered both an understanding of practical realities and an insight into China's national conditions. It made me deeply realise that without reform and opening up, China truly had no way forward. Many of our country's policies and practices at the time were out of touch with reality. There was an overemphasis on class struggle, which was seen as the primary contradiction. Upon visiting northern Shaanxi, it became clear that the principal contradiction was not class struggle, but rather the backward state of productive forces, which failed to meet the basic survival and living needs of the populace. Following the implementation of the household contract responsibility system, the living conditions of the people in northern Shaanxi improved rapidly – at the very least, they no longer went hungry. Naturally, new challenges emerged as development progressed. Thus, Xi Jinping's call to "understand **reality**" refers precisely to the genuine circumstances we grasp through immersing ourselves in life. It is precisely through this understanding of reality and the people's most pressing needs that he has been able to govern pragmatically, grounded in practical realities. Without such comprehension, it is unlikely we would have witnessed the Party's mass line education campaign since the 18th National Congress, the "**Three Stricts and Three Honests**" learning initiative, or the anti-corruption drive. Consequently, a series of correct understandings and insights would not have emerged.

Interview Team: How do you think your experience of being sent down to the countryside influenced General Secretary Xi Jinping's approach to state governance?

Ai Ping: We were all born in 1953 and departed Beijing for Yanchuan on the same day to join the rural placement programme. For me personally, this experience had multifaceted impacts that remain indelibly etched in my memory. Though individual circumstances varied, I believe every educated youth who lived through that era retains profound recollections of those years.

Judging from General Secretary Xi Jinping's series of governance initiatives and his own recollections of his educated youth years, those seven formative years established a "people-centred" orientation for his governance philosophy. In the rural areas of northern Shaanxi, Xi Jinping lived side by side with farmers day in and day out, forging a bond with the people that ran deep.

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

and nurtured his aspiration to deliver tangible benefits for the people. The people form the bedrock of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy, with serving, benefiting, and enriching the people as its fundamental principles. This is neither empty rhetoric nor an easy endeavour.

On 15 November 2012, during a press conference with domestic and foreign journalists, General Secretary Xi Jinping repeatedly emphasised the word "people", stating "The people's aspiration for a better life is the Party's goal." Similarly, on 13 February 2015, during a visit to Liangjiahe Village in Yancun County to greet his former neighbours, Xi Jinping expressed with deep emotion "'When I left Liangjiahe, though my body departed, my heart remained here. Even then, I resolved that should circumstances permit and opportunity arise, I would enter public service to undertake work that genuinely benefits the people.'" General Secretary Xi Jinping not only spoke thus, but acted accordingly. When serving as village Party secretary in Liangjiahe, he thought and acted in this manner; when serving as county Party secretary in Zhengding, he thought and acted in this manner... Throughout his various posts, he never forgot the people. This is because, during his time in Liangjiahe, Xi Jinping had already engraved the word "people" deeply within his heart.

Those educated youth sent to Shaanbei for rural placement were well aware of the region's distinctive character: it was both a rural area and a revolutionary base area. Unlike cities, factories, military corps, or farms, the placement system afforded greater freedom here, enabling more comprehensive, intimate, and authentic interaction with the peasantry. Within this environment, Xi Jinping witnessed the true reality of rural life in Liangjiahe and forged genuine bonds with the farmers.

Yancuan County began recruiting workers from 1970 onwards. Then, starting in 1971 and 1972, large numbers left for education. In 1972 and 1973 alone, nearly one hundred individuals departed for universities and technical colleges. By around 1973, most had left. Xi Jinping was among the last group of Beijing educated youth to depart. During his rural service, he joined the Party, became a branch secretary, and led local villagers in transforming the landscape.

President Xi Jinping's governance philosophy is deeply rooted in his experiences in Liangjiahe,

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy

the most expansive land of the nation and upon the broadest foundation of the people. For millennia, China has remained an agricultural powerhouse. Should farmers remain in the countryside or migrate to cities? How should those who stay be supported, and how should those who move be accommodated? These questions extend beyond rural areas and farmers alone, touching upon the nation's entire developmental blueprint. Having spent seven formative years rooted in the countryside, General Secretary Xi Jinping has never forgotten his former farmer friends. He possesses a profound understanding of China's realities and the true conditions of rural life. Consequently, the series of measures implemented since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China have been exceptionally pragmatic, focused on resolving a range of livelihood and development issues.

His experience in Liangjiahe marked the beginning of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance practice. He once remarked: "The seven years of arduous life in the countryside tempered me greatly. My greatest gains were twofold: first, [redacted], which taught me the meaning of reality, of seeking truth from facts, and of understanding the masses. This has been a lifelong benefit. Second, it cultivated my self-confidence." The concepts of [redacted] "seeking truth from facts" he first mentioned are concrete manifestations of practice. Only through practice can one grasp reality; only through practice can one achieve seeking truth from facts.

In 1979, after graduating from Tsinghua University, Xi Jinping joined the General Office of the Central Military Commission, serving as secretary to Geng Biao, then Minister of National Defence and member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee. For most people, serving as secretary to the Minister of National Defence would be an immensely honourable and promising position. However, Xi Jinping had established the ideal of "doing good for the people" during his time in Liangjiahe. This ideal never wavered, nor did his practice cease. Consequently, he proactively requested to be assigned to the grassroots level. In March 1982 (), he took up the post of Deputy Party Secretary of Zhengding County in Hebei Province, returning once more to the grassroots and to the masses.

Beginning as a village Party secretary at the most grassroots level, he started with concrete actions to serve the people, steadily broadening the scope of his practice, deepening its level, and continuously solidifying his confidence through experience. This confidence was then elevated to become the national confidence of the Chinese people, developing into the Chinese socialist

Ai Ping: The seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy—confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture. It can be said that the seven-year experience as an educated youth marks the historical starting point of General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy.



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Interviewee: Kong Dan, born 1947, former student of Beijing No. 4 High School. Former Chairman and Party Secretary of CITIC Group Corporation. Currently serves as Chairman of the CITIC Foundation for Reform and Development Studies. In February 1969 , he was sent to work in Yanchang County, northern Shaanxi, 58 kilometres from Yanchuan County where Xi Jinping was stationed.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 5 December 2016

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

Interview Team: Mr Kong, hello! In February 1969, you travelled from Beijing to Yanchang County in Shaanxi Province to join the Down to the Countryside Movement, where you remained for four years. Could you describe the historical context of the educated youth being sent to the countryside and the circumstances of Beijing's educated youth being sent to Yan'an?

Kong Dan: The sending of educated youth to the countryside was a political movement that unfolded under the specific historical conditions of the **Cultural Revolution**. It represented an unavoidable and irreversible social trend of that era. While each educated youth faced distinct personal circumstances, they shared common experiences and numerous parallels. This period profoundly shaped the life paths of our generation.

My profound appreciation and clear understanding of this came during a conversation in 2010, when I was stepping down from my post. At that time, Xi Jinping, then a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Vice-President of the State, met with me. On 24 December of that year, I visited Vice-President Xi's office as arranged. When discussing my work and my departure from frontline duties he remarked : Comrade Kong Dan, you have dedicated over forty years to your work, achieving remarkable results during your long tenure at CITIC and Everbright – two key windows of China's reform and opening-up." His summary deeply moved me. His understanding of my circumstances was remarkably detailed; the "over forty years" he referenced began precisely when I was sent to the countryside in 1969. What touched me most was his acknowledgement of my rural placement experience and his affirmation of my subsequent career achievements.

Why were educated youths sent to the countryside? Primarily, following the launch of the **Cultural Revolution**, from the latter half of 1966 through to 1968, schools across the nation largely ceased operations. Universities halted admissions, factories stopped hiring, and over these three years, the accumulated cohort of junior and senior secondary school graduates from the classes of 1966, 1967 and 1968 totalled over ten million. Among them were four million urban students. With no purpose in remaining in the cities, sending them to the countryside became an emergency measure to address their employment situation. Mao

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

Zedong, observing the chaos across China and the severe social problems, issued a call in December 1968 stating that "**it is very necessary for** educated youth to go to the countryside to receive re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants .'" A large-scale movement of sending educated youth to the countryside soon swept across the nation. At the time, Xi Jinping was 15 years old, a first-year secondary school student; I was 21, a sixth-form student. At an age when we should have been studying, we were sent to the countryside together under this national deployment.

That year, approximately 26,000 Beijing educated youth were sent to settle in the Yan'an region of

Shaanxi Province. Beginning on 7 January 1969

7 January 1969, special trains carrying Beijing educated youth departed from Beijing Station to Tongchuan in Shaanxi, continuing until just before the Spring Festival of 1969. At that time, the Yan'an comprised 14 counties. These 26,000-plus Beijing youths were dispersed across Zhidan, Ansai, Yan'an, Yanchuan, Ganquan, Fuxian, Yichuan, Huanglong, Luochuan, Huangling, Yijun (now part of Tongchuan City), and Yanchang. The counties of Wuqi and Zichang were excluded due to inadequate conditions. Yan'an County received the largest contingent, accommodating over 6,000 youths from Dongcheng, Xicheng, Chongwen, and Xuanwu districts. Yichuan and Yancuan counties

Yichuan County accommodated over 3,200 youth from Haidian District, while Yanchuan County took in over 1,380. Zhidan and

Fuxian counties

Yanchang County accommodated educated youths from Xicheng District, with Zhidan taking in over 530, Fuxian County over 2,750, and Yanchang over 2,370. As my alma mater, Beijing No. 4 Middle School, was located in Xicheng District, I was assigned to Gaojiachuan Brigade in Angou Commune, Yanchang County. Ansai County accommodated over 1,850 educated youths from Dongcheng District. Yijun County

accommodated over 2,190 educated youths from Chongwen District. Ganquan County accommodated over 620 individuals. Luochuan County accommodated over 2,150 educated youths from Fengtai District. Huangling County settled over 2,400 educated youths from Chaoyang District. Huanglong County accommodated over 2,400 educated youths from Mentougou and Shijingshan Districts

Yang District, totalling over 2,400 individuals. Huanglong County accommodated educated youths from Mentougou and Shijingshan Districts,

totalling over 970 individuals. The primary rationale for implementing district-to-district and county-to-county placements between Beijing's educated youth and Yan'an's twelve counties at that time was to facilitate subsequent liaison and effectively manage the educated youth.

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

Only twice in modern history have large numbers of outsiders entered Yan'an: the first was the Central Red Army, the second the Beijing educated youth. The Communist-led Red Army arrived in Yan'an, where upon this loess plateau they orchestrated a revolutionary miracle that ushered in a new era. Over 26,000 Beijing educated youth came to Yan'an, enduring arduous trials of life in this relatively small, isolated and impoverished region. They weathered harsh frosts, rains and snows, spending unforgettable years of their youth here.

I have recently been studying The Communist Party of China: Ninety Years, which describes the Down to the Countryside Movement as follows:¹¹ By 1981, the number of educated youths who had participated in the movement had reached over 16 million. The vast majority of educated youth went to the countryside and frontier regions to understand society, engage with workers and peasants, and undergo training in arduous conditions, thereby enhancing their capabilities. They contributed to rural development and the revitalisation of underdeveloped areas of the motherland, with some growing into leading figures and key professionals across various fields. However, a large number of educated youth lost the opportunity to receive formal education in schools, creating a gap in talent development and posing significant challenges to the nation's modernisation efforts.¹² I believe this passage offers a relatively objective assessment of the Down to the Countryside Movement.

I interview Panel: During his address at Peking University, Xi Jinping remarked, "Each generation of youth has its own circumstances and opportunities, and must chart their life course and create history within the conditions of their own era."¹³ How do you interpret this statement?

Kong Dan: I understand "circumstances" to refer to one's personal experiences and fortune. The term ~~chance~~ passes both chance and destiny; when such an "opportunity" arises, seizing and responding to it shapes one's "circumstances." In practice, "opportunity" and "circumstances" are often used together to describe human destiny. In 1965, at the age of 18, I joined the Party at Beijing No. 4 Middle School. I was the first student Party member at the school at that time and among the very few first cohort of secondary school Party members in Beijing.

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

This could be described as an opportunity. The misfortunes ~~of~~ the **Cultural Revolution**, however, constituted a fate – many events swept us along, making our participation largely involuntary. Similarly, Xi Jinping and our cohort of educated youth embarking on that arduous, singular journey to the Loess Plateau of northern Shaanxi was also a fate – the destiny of our generation.

To be sure, Xi Jinping and I shared some parallels in our circumstances at the time. We were both children of high-ranking officials – what we might now call **the 'red second generation'**. Yet our experiences were not identical. My mother, Xu Ming (who had served as Deputy Secretary-General of the State Council before the Cultural Revolution), took her own life after suffering persecution during those years. My father, Kong Yuan (former head of the Central Investigation Department before the Cultural Revolution), was imprisoned, and I myself spent several months behind bars. My younger brother had already been sent to Shanxi Province as a 'down-to-the-countryside youth'. 'The higher-ups' forbade me from joining him in Shanxi because we were both 'children of counter-revolutionary gangs' and had to be separated. Xi Jinping was also a 'child of a counter-revolutionary gang'—his father, Xi Zhongxun, had been subjected to public criticism during the Cultural Revolution. That was where our experiences converged. Where they diverged was that his father's persecution began earlier than my father's, **starting in 1962**.

. He was only 15 when he went to the countryside, whereas I was already 21 and likely in better physical condition than him at the time.

My mindset at the time was that Beijing held no lingering appeal; leaving felt like a relief. Thus, when I departed, my state of mind was calm and detached, devoid of any sense of loss. This may have differed from the feelings of many other educated youths. Xi Jinping's state of mind at the time appears to have been similar to mine. Recalling this period, he remarked that being sent to the countryside felt like a weight lifted from his shoulders. Given his circumstances, remaining in Beijing would have been far more perilous – he might not even have known whether he'd live or die. He recounted that as the train began its journey, the carriage was filled with wailing; everyone was tearfully clinging to each other, yet he found himself smiling.

In this chapter of our shared life's "fortunes," our experiences mirrored each other: our fathers persecuted, our families torn asunder

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

and scattered to the four corners of the earth. When the great social tide surged, we were swept along by it, powerless to resist. During the Red Guard period, educated youths with favourable political backgrounds could enlist in the army or secure factory jobs, but those like Xi Jinping and myself, labelled as "**children of gang members**," had no such opportunities. Arriving in the rural north of Shaanxi, I never contemplated how long I might stay, nor did I harbour any romantic notions of integrating with the poor peasants and taking root in the countryside for life. My mindset was simply: I am a farmer, and I must survive.

Interview Team: From your own perspective, what was life like as an educated youth?

KongDan Over the years, numerous films and television dramas have chronicled the stories of educated youths from that era. **There exists a genre termed "scar literature," which vividly portrays the painful experiences of that period.** Conversely, some idealistic works romanticise the lives of those educated youths. I recall after the broadcast of the television drama "Romance in Blood," which depicted Beijing's educated youths, some young colleagues at CITIC remarked: "Mr Kong, we truly envy you! Look how romantic your lives were back then!" I replied, "That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it? That wasn't our reality. A minority might have had that kind of privileged lifestyle, but the vast majority of us were simply sent straight to the countryside, had to adapt immediately to rural life, and became pure farmers. It wasn't as unbearably harsh as some literary works depict, nor as romanticised as others claim. I believe that was the reality for most educated youths."

What stands out in my memory is February 1969, when our group of Beijing educated youths travelled by lorry through Yan'an to Yanchang County. There, farmers led us over mountains and through valleys to various production brigades. Truthfully, upon arrival we offered little to the local communities; rather, we became a burden. The villagers not only had to look after us but also teach us labour skills, guiding us through every stage of the farming cycle. Spring heralded the sowing of autumn crops: maize, millet, sorghum, and buckwheat. Before planting, we ploughed the fields with the 'dengtou'. This heavy-duty plough, characteristic of northern Shaanxi farmers,

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It is crescent-shaped, covering a large area and taking in more soil. After breaking up the clods, we would then break them down further. Soon after sowing, the crops would sprout. As they grew, we had to weed regularly. Come midsummer, the oxen refused to work by day, so we'd often drive them up the hills to plough the terraces at one or two in the morning. To urge the oxen downhill, you had to use the local dialect **z** ‘‘Xia (pronounced **ha**) **b**— only then would they understand.

The method for sowing wheat in Northern Shaanxi was quite distinctive. We filled sacks with sheep dung, had donkeys carry them to the field at the foot of the mountain, and placed a sack of dung at regular intervals. Then, in a wicker basket, we'd mix the wheat seeds and dung evenly by hand. One person ahead would dig holes with a hoe, while the next would scatter the dung-seed mixture into each hole, covering it with soil by foot. Once sown, the wheat would slowly take root.

Yields were meagre back then, with sparse wheat growth yielding no more than a hundred or so catties per mu. Come summer harvest, we cut the wheat on the plateau, bound the stalks into sheaves, and used those pointed-end poles to lift one sheaf, then tie up the nearest one and carry both. Often we'd trek six or seven li, sometimes even ten, without setting the sheaves down to rest. If we laid them on the ground, the grains would fall out. So we had to carry them straight back to the threshing floor in the valley before heading back up the hill for more.

Many labour skills proved impossible for some educated youth to master, as they harboured resistance and felt no interest whatsoever. My mindset back then was this: I would do the work well, and do it with flair and grace, finding enjoyment in the process.

Interview Team: You mentioned that Xi Jinping once remarked to Chang Zhenming: "That Kong Dan of yours was still reading Hegel in **h i s c a v e d w e l l i n g" Could you elaborate on the origins of this story?**

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

Kong Dan: At that time, I was Chairman of CITIC, and Chang Zhenming was the General Manager. On one occasion, he went to Shanghai and met Xi Jinping, who was then the Shanghai Municipal Party Secretary. Upon his return, he told me "I met Secretary Xi. Secretary Xi said to me, 'Your Kong Dan was reading Hegel in a cave dwelling'..."

Xi Jinping and I never met in northern Shaanxi during those years, but we had heard of each other. Firstly, because we were both notorious 'children of the Black Gang' among the educated youth, perhaps even somewhat famous. Secondly, our fathers knew each other well. In 2009, when Xi Jinping visited Luoyang, H e n a n for research, he inspected the Luoyang Mining Machinery Factory where his father, Xi Zhongxun, had been sent for re-education through labour during his fall from grace. After reform and opening up, this factory became CITIC Heavy Industries, so I was there to receive him. Upon meeting me, he remarked to those around him, "Kong Dan's mother and my father were colleagues at the State Council." I hastened to reply, "Colleague indeed! Comrade Xi Zhongxun was Vice Premier and Secretary-General, while my mother was merely Deputy Secretary-General – a subordinate." He chuckled, "Well, colleagues nonetheless."

During my time in the countryside, labour was arduous and life was difficult, but politically it remained stable. I could still read books and have time for it. After finishing work in the evening and having dinner, the rest of the time was mine to arrange. Especially in winter, apart from some water conservancy projects, there wasn't much fieldwork. If I hadn't returned to Beijing, I would have had ample time to read properly. I later learned that Xi Jinping read extensively during that period, focusing primarily on political, economic, and literary works. My reading was eclectic; I devoured whatever books I could find, most brought from Beijing. Having completed the entire secondary school curriculum at Beijing No. 4 High School, I sought out university-level textbooks in advanced mathematics, general physics, and general chemistry – core first- and second-year science and engineering courses. At that time, I read many relatively rare internally published works, such as political books like Trotsky: A Critical Biography and De Grasse's The New Class, as well as Chinese and foreign classical literature. Xi Jinping brought two crates of books with him back then. After finishing them, he would constantly

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exchanged and borrowed books to read. Combined with the works he mentioned reading or quoted in his speeches, I felt the sheer volume and breadth of his reading surpassed my own. My reading back then wasn't driven by grand revolutionary ideals like some others—no desire to society or reshape the nation. No. I simply felt reading was a natural human need. In our earthen cave dwellings, we fashioned a stone slab ourselves. We inserted two tree trunks into the cave, laid a horizontal log across them, and placed the stone slab on top. There we could lie prone and read. Looking back now, the nights of northern Shaanxi remain an indelible image, etched deep within my memory. The darkness seemed to descend particularly early in those mountainous regions. Summers were somewhat better, but autumn and winter brought darkness especially swiftly. Whether dusk fell early or late, whether winter or summer, we would gather in the cave dwelling, each bringing our own books to read. In the pitch-black night, one could scarcely see one's hand before one's eyes. Only a kerosene lamp in the cave shed a faint glow. We huddled around that lamp, perched on the stone slab to read. I later learned that Xi Jinping, during his evenings studying in the cave, also huddled by a kerosene lamp, often leaving his nostrils blackened by the fumes.

For us then, reading was a pleasure. Opening a book instantly transported us to another world, severing ties with daily reality. You'd forget the day's labours, the weariness and drowsiness, and become utterly absorbed within the pages. Reading philosophy, literature, or history would captivate you, instantly transporting you to another realm. In War and Peace, one glimpsed the lives of Russian nobility against the grand backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars, witnessed the rolling smoke of battle; in Ninety-Three, one observed the fierce and majestic scenes of French class struggle, saw the iron discipline of revolution clashing with the agonising choices of personal affection. As Xi Jinping remarked, during my time working in the fields of northern Shaanxi, I did indeed read Hegel. Reading Hegel makes a difference; a mind that has been cultivated and trained is fundamentally different from one that has not.

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Later, it was said that if a matter was logically incomplete or inconsistent, Kong Dan would not accept it. In truth, this was the power of theory. When university entrance examinations resumed in 1977, I did not apply for undergraduate studies. Instead, I directly applied for postgraduate studies in economics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1978 and was admitted. I became part of the first cohort of postgraduates admitted under the reinstated postgraduate admissions system who had never attended university, gaining entry through equivalent academic qualifications. This outcome was attributable not only to the solid foundation laid at Beijing No. 4 High School but also, absolutely, to my persistent reading and study during my time working in the countryside in northern Shaanxi.

At that time, Liu Shaoqi's On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members exerted a profound influence upon me. I was also strongly shaped by Confucian thought, which emphasises "investigating things to gain **knowledge**," "rectifying the mind and sincerity," and "cultivating oneself, harmonising the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world." I recall obtaining a book on American agricultural production methods, which detailed their highly efficient intensive farming practices. Following the 1958 "Great Leap Forward" and the 1962 reform of the People's Commune system to a "three-tier ownership with the production brigade as the foundation," ownership began to be devolved. It could be said that the original communal dining hall system had largely disappeared. Yet in our area, a single brigade still worked collectively—starting and finishing together, with no distinction made between those who worked hard and those who did little. Labour productivity remained extremely low, representing a different form of communal system. After reading that book on American agricultural production methods, I pondered how to develop China's agriculture. Such thoughts were, of course, rudimentary and naive. Later, when the central government implemented the household contract responsibility system, I found it entirely natural and particularly easy to accept. Yet within the Party, it sparked debate, with some provincial Party secretaries expressing reservations, arguing that collective production methods should be preserved. For me, having spent four years in the countryside and studied agricultural research literature, the matter seemed straightforward and inevitable. I have always maintained that farmers' initiative is a natural force. Naturally, many new developments have emerged today, requiring us to re-examine how to resolve land transfer issues, how to stimulate farmers' motivation,

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. Furthermore, we must address the question of who will cultivate the land effectively once 270 million farmers migrate to urban areas. Resolving the "three rural issues" requires a profound understanding of rural communities and their inhabitants.

Interview Team: General Secretary Xi Jinping once stated, "One must fasten the first button of life correctly." How do you interpret this, M ?

K ong Dan: My personal interpretation is that it means cultivating sound study and reading habits, establishing a correct outlook on life, and charting one's own path. For our generation, the rural placement experience was indeed our **"first button** in life." We had to confront society independently—no longer viewed as inexperienced youths, but treated as adults. The villagers of Northern Shaanxi were kind-hearted; they did not treat us differently because we were **'children of counter-revolutionary elements'**. I recall one elderly woman who knew of my family's circumstances and showed me particular concern. Once, after I had unstitched and washed my quilt and it had just dried, she came over with needle and thread to sew it back together for me. She always regarded me as a sort of son.

My ability to traverse mountain paths was honed during that time. Northern Shaanxi is criss-crossed by undulating mountain trails; each day began with ascents and descents. The locals taught me that mountain walking demands patience—one must proceed slowly and steadily to cover distance. Haste leads to sweat within moments and leaves you gasping for breath! Great wisdom lies among the common folk. This truth applies not only to mountain paths but also to life and work. The greater the difficulty, the more one must avoid haste. Only by slowing down and steady oneself can one overcome obstacles and journey further. 'Steady progress **leads to distant goals**'

The villagers were wonderfully hospitable. They all smoked pipe tobacco. When I first arrived in the countryside, one fellow finished his bowl, wiped the mouthpiece on his shirt, refilled it with tobacco, and offered it to me. I was rather taken aback at first, but I couldn't refuse such kindness! So I

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

force it into my mouth. Seeing me smoke like one of them, the villager felt a bond and cheerfully lit it for me. I remember distinctly that the very first puff made me dizzy. The tobacco was so potent it felt like an explosion in my mouth, shooting up my nostrils and into my lungs, choking me until tears streamed down my face. Seeing the sincerity in their eyes, I forced myself to hold back the cough. From then on, I smoked alongside them. I kept it up for **thirty-four** years, only quitting during the 2003 **SARS outbreak**. Just this one habit shows how profoundly—or rather, how **deeply ingrained**—the influence of my Shaanbei countrymen and rural life became.

Another minor incident involving smoking remains unforgettable to this day. To secure a cigarette, I made a bet with someone that I could down half a jin of liquor in one go. They didn't believe me, so we walked over five miles to the commune's supply and marketing cooperative. There, we had half a catty of liquor poured into a porcelain jug. I lifted it and downed the entire contents in one go. The fellow was instantly convinced and paid up **three** cartons of cigarettes. Back then, a carton cost **six** mao, while a packet was six fen.

Ji Yans. This incident not only demonstrated my manly character but also netted me **three** cartons of cigarettes, keeping me in high spirits for a long time. Even today, recalling it still makes me chuckle. Such was the joy bestowed upon me by the rural landscapes of Northern Shaanxi—a joy preserved like a precious gem within my memory. Whenever these happy recollections surface, the villages and people of Northern Shaanxi reappear before my eyes. That land is not merely where I toiled, but the homeland of my soul; its inhabitants are not just companions, but spiritual kin. I feel that the first button of my life was fastened correctly.

For Xi Jinping, too, his placement in northern Shaanxi marked the first station of his life's journey. So young then, he spent seven years on the Loess Plateau, accomplishing so much that was no mean feat. Thus, his first step was taken with greater steadfastness, his first button fastened more securely. This laid the most crucial foundation for navigating the subsequent stages of his life and fastening every other button along the way.

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

foundation for navigating subsequent life journeys and fastening subsequent buttons.

Interview Team: General Secretary Xi Jinping has often reflected on his years as an educated youth, frequently recalling those experiences. In your memory and understanding, what did the Down to the Countryside Movement signify for your generation?

Kong Dan: During my time in Shaanxi, I learned to find joy amidst hardship. Family upheavals and the stark contrast in living conditions weighed heavily upon me, yet I refused to succumb to negativity, instead adapting to reality.

Within the first year, I swiftly integrated into rural life, mastering various farm tasks. I became the most productive among the educated youth in our brigade, earning ten labour points daily – a profoundly rewarding achievement. Yet misfortune struck the following year: working too strenuously, I contracted lobar pneumonia, coughed up blood, and received inadequate treatment, leaving my health severely weakened. During the hot weather, something bit my foot, causing it to swell up completely. Dragging that swollen foot up mountain paths and doing farm work every day was truly becoming unbearable.

Then, a stroke of good fortune arrived. The village watermelons were ripening, requiring two people to guard the fields. But the fields lay within the graveyard, and no one dared go there. I was the only one who volunteered. I hung a mosquito net from a jujube tree in the field and laid a bed beneath it. Each day, I watched over the melons while reading. This period allowed me to temporarily escape farm labour and hunger, giving my body a chance to recuperate. The emerald melon patch on the Loess Plateau resembled an oasis in the desert, its ripe watermelons gleaming with a lustrous, jade-like sheen under the sun. The brigade permitted the melon watchers to eat the fruit. When hunger or thirst struck, I'd pluck a watermelon, needing no knife—just a sharp slap with my palm would split it open. Some revealed red flesh, others yellow, each sweet and juicy. To this day, I often recall that verdant expanse of melon

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

field, a source of life's simple joys discovered during hardship. Later, no matter what difficulties I faced, I never ceased seeking life's pleasures and happiness while confronting adversity. This, perhaps, is what cultivating oneself truly means!

In his address at Peking University, General Secretary Xi specifically elaborated on the principles of "**investigating things to attain knowledge**" and "**Harmonising the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world**" ().

These words, which contain rich wisdom. Speaking for myself, during my time in the countryside, I never contemplated what I might do in the future, nor did I how long I would remain in northern Shaanxi. I simply did what needed doing, worked when labour was required, and sought to savour life's pleasures within that labour. Life is lived with a frown, and life is lived with a smile! My old companions often remarked upon meeting me "You truly are one who takes things in stride"! Later, during the CITIC Pacific Australian Dollar Futures Contract crisis, my days were filled with relentless demands and immense pressure, yet I slept soundly. Each night in bed, I'd review the day's work and solutions, then ask myself "Is there another way?" Answering my own question "No." Then I'd sleep. Having thought it through thoroughly, staying awake served no purpose.

One can adopt different attitudes towards life. Living cheerfully is life; living with a frown is also life. "Adding sorrow to sorrow, adding hardship to hardship" ~~finding joy in hardship, turning hardship into joy~~. When I first arrived in the countryside, I pondered how to live like the local farmers, how to truly integrate with them. I felt I must master the entire range of farm work; only then could I genuinely become part of rural life. Within a year, I'd mastered every task. This was a necessity for survival and daily life. By the time I left the countryside, I'd become a "skilled" farmer, thoroughly ruralised in every aspect of my being. I spoke the dialect of northern Shaanxi. I wore homespun garments, for the clothes I'd brought had worn thin. A white sheepskin scarf was tied around my head—one such scarf lasted a year.

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in the countryside. In summer, I'd fold it lengthwise and tie it around my head to wipe sweat; in winter, I'd unfold it, drape it from back to front, and knot it above my brow for warmth. My shoes were handmade by the villagers, and my cotton-padded jacket was an old quilted coat they'd made. After living there for four years, I felt I'd become one of them, seeing no difference between myself and the farmers.

Xi Jinping spent seven years in Liangjiahe. Though six years my junior, he remained in the countryside far longer than I did. Not only did he join the Party there, but he also became the village Party secretary. Truly remarkable and extraordinary! Though we had no interaction during that period, judging from my own four years in northern Shaanxi's countryside and tracing his subsequent trajectory, his seven years there must have immersed him in the harshest, most arduous existence imaginable. It was through this suffering that he achieved a profound personal transformation.

Interview Panel: Xi Jinping once remarked: "The seven years of arduous life during the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement greatly tempered me. Firstly, it taught me what practicality, seeking truth from facts, and the masses truly mean. Secondly, it cultivated my self-confidence."
How do you interpret these insights and gains he described?

KongDan: I believe these insights are entirely logical, representing the intellectual and spiritual fruits of his prolonged trials. Many of us educated youth experienced similar sentiments to varying degrees.

The Down to the Countryside Movement was unprecedented and unparalleled. It was a unique experience for our generation. One interpretation suggests that for the educated youth, it served as a form of tempering, a forging of character. The Japanese once described Nie Weiping's chess style as "**"G**rand Revolution **chess**". You play by the rules, yet he defies them, refusing to play conventionally. He possesses this uncanny ability, compelling Japan's top-tier players to dread facing him, intimidated by his tenacious, unyielding style and his unpredictable, unconventional moves. Is this style connected to Nie Weiping's **Cultural Revolution** experiences,

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

and his six years of rural placement? I believe there is some connection.

For myself, the experience of being sent down to the countryside forged my character, willpower, integrity, and ability to communicate with ordinary people. Previously, we lacked such communication skills; we were too pedantic, and people simply couldn't connect with us. The communication skills we later developed were, I believe, genuinely honed through our rural experiences. Equally significant was the direct exposure to the hardships endured by ordinary people. For senior leaders in particular, such trials became a valuable asset, even positively shaping their political careers. This included fostering resolve, character, integrity, principles, moral fibre, and perspective, alongside the ability to engage with the masses – what we might now call being grounded. From this perspective, the people-oriented sentiments, pragmatic approach, steady demeanour, extraordinary vision, and the blend of political acumen and courage displayed by Xi Jinping since assuming central leadership duties – particularly since the 18th Party Congress – can, I believe, be traced back to his seven years of rural placement in northern Shaanxi.

Xi Jinping and I, as children of cadres, did not enjoy particularly privileged upbringings. Yet objectively speaking, our living conditions were still comparatively better than those of ordinary cadres, let alone the general populace. For instance, even during **the Cultural Revolution** when members of my family were imprisoned or I still received a monthly allowance of 15 yuan and could occasionally afford to improve my diet with dishes like stir-fried pancakes. From birth to the present day, the most arduous period of my life was undoubtedly spent in the rural villages of northern Shaanxi. I imagine Xi Jinping's experience was much the same. Living year after year directly among the common folk, one gains a stark, unfiltered view of the existence of China's peasants and thus feels the injustice of fate. Back then, a farmer in northern Shaanxi spent his entire life hoping for one thing: to eat his fill, to marry a wife, to have a son, to earn enough for his coffin. That was his life. Because of the harsh environment, their lifespans were also relatively short. The philosophy of life they directly conveyed to us was this:

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

was that a lifetime of hardship was simply the way things were. Their joys and sorrows were tethered to this vast expanse of land. Listen to the songs they sang, and you could sense that their so-called happiness and suffering were experienced against this very backdrop of existence.

When Beijing's educated youth went to the countryside, including Xi Jinping, they were suddenly confronted with society's lowest strata—even the most wretched among China's peasants. The contrast was stark, yet profoundly valuable, for it offered genuine insight into the people and China's true national conditions.

The family I was closest to in the village were the Gaos. They had three sons: the eldest, the second, and the youngest. The eldest wore a perpetual look of hardship, while the images of the second and youngest sons remain vivid in my mind. I recall distinctly that the youngest later married a woman from Mizhi, a strikingly beautiful girl—as the saying goes, “Mizhi women, Suide men”. Her family disapproved of the poverty here, wearing sour expressions. “If there were food, why would she marry here?” they'd say. Thus, to communicate with farmers, the prerequisite is sharing their social stratum – something we achieved back then. Though we now belong to a different class, those feelings and that communication remain indelible, and they continue to motivate us. Thus, our experience of being sent down to the countryside was not only a form of training but also deepened our understanding of China's national conditions and strengthened our bond with the people. This had a profound and lasting impact on our subsequent life experiences.

I believe that state governance is a complex systemic endeavour. President Xi Jinping's philosophy of governance has a fundamental starting point and ultimate focus—the people. His seven years as an educated youth laid the foundation for this philosophy, enabling him to grasp profoundly the significance of the people as both the origin and the destination.

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

Interview Team: Do you believe General Secretary Xi Jinping's concept of targeted poverty alleviation is connected to his experience as a sent-down youth in the countryside?

Kong Dan: There is undoubtedly a connection. During his seven years in Yanchuan, General Secretary Xi came to understand what rural life truly meant, witnessing firsthand the harshest conditions in China's countryside. In regions like northern Shaanxi and Gansu, where natural conditions are particularly challenging, the landscape is dominated by loess slopes. Crops yield little grain, and with no alternative sources of income, farmers struggle even to feed themselves. It can be said that during those seven years in the countryside, he gained a profound understanding of the people's real hardships and forged a deep bond with them. His discourse on lifting the people out of hardship is remarkably detailed, revealing his profound and nuanced understanding of the matter. The housing, education, healthcare, and sanitation needs of vast populations – seventy million impoverished citizens, sixty million left-behind children, forty million left-behind women, and two hundred and sixty to seven hundred million migrant workers – must be addressed. Failing to resolve these issues would be a betrayal of the people, a betrayal of the Communist Party's very essence, and a departure from the socialist path the Party leads the people upon.

Allowing some to prosper first does not mean abandoning the path to common prosperity. Not every problem can be solved by the market economy alone. Can issues like income distribution imbalances and severe wealth disparity be resolved solely through market forces? Can environmental pollution, now at critical levels, be tackled by the market economy alone? Marxist economics reveals the essence of capitalists—

—that for profit, it will stop at nothing. Capitalism is a system that, for the sake of profit, will disregard all human laws. In Capital, there is a passage that cuts to the heart: "With a 10% profit, capital will be assured of being employed everywhere; with a 20% profit, capital will become active; with a 50% profit, capital will take risks; for 100% profit, it will trample upon all human laws; for 300% profit, it will commit any crime, even risking the gallows." If the deployment of capital remains unrestrained, it will exploit resources destructively. Our Party and government differ fundamentally from the political parties and governments of Western capitalist nations.

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government. Our Party is a Party that serves the people, and our government is a government that serves the people. The various governance measures implemented since the 18th National Congress of the Party fully demonstrate one point: General Secretary Xi Jinping has firmly grasped the steering wheel guiding the nation and its people forward. His ability to do so is inseparable from his seven-year experience in northern Shaanxi, where his roots were deeply embedded among the people and his heart has always been connected to them.

I believe that among **the "four major dangers"** facing our Party, the greatest peril is detachment from the masses. Some officials, aloof and detached, remain ignorant of the people's hardships, fostering various manifestations of alienation. Some even engage in trading power for money or power for favours, severely damaging the Party's image among the populace. The Central Committee of the Party with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has resolutely opposed corruption and cracked down **on** the "four forms of misconduct," serving as a stark warning to Party members and officials not to forget the people or become estranged from them.

I understand that General Secretary Xi Jinping's governance philosophy has deep roots, one source being his close connection with the people. This connection is not derived from books or indirect knowledge, but from living among the people, experiencing their joys and sorrows, and solving their real problems. The proposal of the "Chinese Dream" is inseparable from his experience of sharing the same breath and destiny with the people, and from the foundation of the masses. General Secretary Xi harbours lofty aspirations. The Chinese Dream embodies his ideals and ambitions, his responsibility and commitment, and stands as the shared dream of every Chinese person.

Our generation collectively endured the upheavals of **the Cultural Revolution** and **the Down to the Countryside Movement**, forging the spiritual resilience that defines us. Naturally, the new generation will mature within their own era's context. During a lecture at Peking University, I once remarked: "I hope young people do not merely reap the benefits of societal progress and development; they should feel a responsibility to contribute their efforts and efforts towards this very progress and development. You may possess diverse backgrounds,

Kong Dan: His seven years in northern Shaanxi were truly arduous and remarkable.

may have different motivations, may have different pursuits, but you cannot be divorced from ~~the road~~^{the road of} social progress." This statement does not impose our experiences upon the young, nor does it require them to repeat the path we walked. Rather, it affirms that each generation has its own experiences, and each generation should shoulder its own mission and responsibilities.

Interview Team: You greatly appreciate General Secretary Xi Jinping's statement: ▶▶ The path we walk, we choose ourselves. Only the wearer knows if the shoe fits. ▶▶ Could you elaborate on your understanding of this statement?

Kong Dan: General Secretary Xi frequently quotes this saying. My interpretation is that we must steadfastly uphold our own path and distinctive characteristics, unwaveringly advancing socialism with Chinese characteristics. This is dictated by three factors: China's historical legacy, cultural roots, and contemporary realities. Some in China blindly champion Western concepts and values, but can we truly resolve China's practical issues by applying theories designed to explain Western capitalism? Our past journey demonstrates this is untenable. We must forge our own path, much like how traditional Chinese medicine takes a pulse: even when patients share the same fever, different prescriptions are required for different individuals. theories of Western capitalism to resolve China's practical problems? Our historical experience demonstrates this is untenable. We must forge our own path, much like traditional Chinese medicine's pulse diagnosis: even when patients share the same fever, distinct prescriptions are required for different constitutions. Only through concrete analysis of specific circumstances, identifying the root cause, can the remedy truly cure the ailment.

General Secretary Xi possesses unwavering conviction and clarity regarding China's path: to steadfastly follow our own course, the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. By 2021, the Communist Party of China will mark its centenary. As the first centenary goal approaches, I count myself fortunate to witness the realisation of a moderately prosperous society in all respects. This is no ordinary prosperity, but comprehensive well-being; nor is it mere economic strength, but a new epoch in China's history.

I am currently reading Ninety Years of the Communist Party of China, a three-volume work that divides the ninety-year period

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period is divided into three historical phases. The first historical phase **is termed** the "Period of the New Democratic ~~the~~ second historical phase is termed **the "Period of Socialist Revolution and Construction"**. The third historical phase, extending to 2011, is termed **the "New Period of Reform, Opening Up and Socialist Modernisation"**. Personally, I believe that since the 18th CPC National Congress, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has ushered in a fourth historical phase. This is an entirely new period, **which can be termed** the "Period of the Great **Rejuvenation** of the Chinese Nation". Over the past four years since the 18th CPC National Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping has demonstrated great ambition and vision in strategic planning. **From the "Chinese Dream"** to the "Two Centenary Goals", from driving development to ~~reforms~~, from economic restructuring to the "Four Confidences", from diplomatic arrangements to military reforms, and from anti-corruption to poverty alleviation – all demonstrate his far-reaching vision and masterful strategy. As the core of the Party Central Committee and the entire Party, he shoulders the weighty responsibility of leading the Chinese people towards the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The journey ahead is arduous, but steady progress will ultimately realise our dreams. In this, I have unwavering conviction and confidence.

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Interviewee: Han Zhong, secondary school pupil at Hanzhong No. 1 Middle School, Shaanxi Province.

April 1971. In May 1971, recruited to work at Hanzhong General Machinery Factory. After the restoration of the national university entrance examinations, enrolled in the History Department of Beijing Normal University for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. After graduation, worked at the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the Policy Research Office of the CPC Central Committee. Currently serves as Executive Vice President of the Party School of the CPC Central Committee.

Interview Team: Qiu Ran, Huang Shan, Chen Si, et al.

Interview Date: 16 January 2017

Location: Central Party School Television Studio

He Yiting: The youngest educated youth, sent to the harshest place, and spent the longest time in the countryside

Interview Team: Regarding General Secretary Xi Jinping's youth league experience, we have already interviewed villagers from Liangjiahe and several Beijing-based youth league members who were sent to the countryside. We have gathered substantial first-hand accounts of his time as a youth league member. Now, we wish to gain a broader understanding of the broader context of the youth league movement during that era, in order to contextualise General Secretary Xi Jinping's seven-year youth league experience within a wider historical framework. We understand that you were **also among the "third cohort"** of educated youth sent to the countryside. Could you elaborate on the historical context of the Down to the Countryside Movement during that period? **He Yiting:** Your approach and line of inquiry are excellent. Understanding the broader circumstances of the entire

Down to the Countryside Movement

will indeed deepen our understanding of General Secretary Xi Jinping's seven years as an educated youth in northern Shaanxi.

Broadly speaking, the Down to the Countryside Movement can be divided into two historical phases. The first phase spanned roughly from the mid-1950s ~~to~~ the Cultural Revolution in 1966, lasting a little over a decade.

This period primarily explored solutions to the surplus urban labour force, integrating it with efforts to transform backward rural areas, develop frontier regions, and advance economic and social progress in remote mountainous areas. The aim was to forge an employment pathway suited to China's national conditions. Policies during this time were relatively stable, characterised by state advocacy and individual voluntary participation. Overall, the scale of the Down to the Countryside Movement during this period was modest, involving relatively few participants. From 1955 to 1966, approximately 1.2 million urban educated youth nationwide

The subsequent phase, spanning roughly ten years from 1967 to 1978, witnessed the movement evolve ~~to~~ a vast campaign during the specific historical context of the **Cultural Revolution**. Over 16 million urban youth were dispatched to rural areas and frontier regions nationwide. Among them, the first wave comprised approximately 4 million urban junior and senior high school graduates from the years 1966, 1967, and 1968. General Secretary Xi Jinping himself belonged to this cohort of 4 million "three older cohorts" educated youth.

He Yiting: The youngest educated youth, sent to the harshest place, and spent the longest time in the countryside focus primarily on the circumstances of this period.

On 22 December 1968, the People's Daily published news of urban residents and educated youths from Huining County, Gansu Province settling in the countryside. Crucially, it conveyed Chairman Mao's latest directive "It is essential for educated youths to go to the countryside and undergo re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants. We must persuade urban cadres and others to send their children who have completed junior high, senior high, or university education to the countryside, mobilising them to do so. Comrades in rural areas everywhere should welcome them." The following day, People's Daily and other news outlets prominently featured reports of educated youth across the country enthusiastically responding to Chairman Mao's call, "heading to the countryside with boundless enthusiasm, tempering their revolutionary spirit in the vast expanse of the land." This sparked an extremely powerful nationwide reaction. At that time, Chairman Mao's authority reached the zenith of his life; his words truly carried the weight of ten thousand. His command immediately unleashed a nationwide surge of the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement.

Why did Chairman Mao make the decision at that time for "educated youth to go to the countryside and receive re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants"?

Following the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, universities ceased admissions, secondary schools suspended classes, and factories halted recruitment. By 1968, three cohorts of junior and senior secondary school graduates from 1966, 1967, and 1968 had accumulated within schools "engaging in revolutionary activities," effectively becoming surplus labour in urban areas. As the "three cohorts" of secondary students remained in schools, it followed that primary school graduates from 1966 and subsequent years could not progress to secondary education, while children reaching school age were unable to enrol in primary schools. By 1968, this situation had become critically severe. In a nation of such vast scale, with so many pupils and students, the failure to restore normal educational order over such an extended period left universities, secondary schools, and primary schools in utter disarray. This phenomenon, intertwined with the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, exacerbated the nation's social turmoil. Against this backdrop, the sending of educated youth to the countryside

He Yiting: The youngest educated youth, sent to the harshest place, and spent the longest time in the countryside

became not only an emergency measure to address secondary school students' employment issues but also a political imperative envisioned by Chairman Mao as essential for the Cultural Revolution's progression from "great chaos" to "great order."

In Chairman Mao's view, sending educated youth to the countryside represented an effective means of transforming young students and "fighting revisionism and guarding the Party." When the Cultural Revolution began, the Red Guards—predominantly composed of young students—became the vanguard charging into battle across the entire movement, receiving Chairman Mao's enthusiastic support. Chairman Mao specifically instructed at the time that workers and peasants must not be organised against students, and urged them not to interfere with student affairs. However, as the movement progressed, particularly by the summer of 1968, Chairman Mao grew increasingly disillusioned with the Red Guards'

increasingly disillusioned with certain actions of the Red Guards. On 27 July that year, he dispatched military propaganda teams to work alongside Beijing's worker propaganda teams in entering Tsinghua University to halt the armed clashes occurring there. On the morning of 28 July, Chairman Mao and

other central leaders held a five-hour discussion with **the "Five Great Leaders"** of the Beijing Red Guards. They delivered a stern rebuke for their failure to "struggle, criticise, or reform" – particularly for

engaging in factional strife and even armed clashes.⁸ On 25th December, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the State Council, and the Central Cultural Revolution Group jointly issued a notice dispatching worker and military propaganda teams to universities, secondary schools, and primary schools

to "transform places where intellectuals congregate".⁹ In 1968

Chairman Mao further issued the directive: "Send educated youth to the countryside to undergo re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants." Authoritative publications

such as the People's Daily hailed this decision as "a new battle cry from the proletarian headquarters" and "the fundamental path to revolutionise the thinking of educated youth and cultivate successors for the proletarian revolutionary cause."¹⁰ In accordance with Chairman Mao's directives, a nationwide

mobilisation for the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement commenced. Beyond fully

utilising the propaganda apparatus, system, it also extensively utilised organisational ties within work units, schools, neighbourhoods, communities, and families. This created a political atmosphere where going to the countryside was honourable, while refusing to do so was considered shameful.

At the time, I was a secondary school pupil at Hanzhong No. 1 Middle School in Shaanxi Province.

From June 1966 onwards,

He Yiting: The youngest educated youth, sent to the harshest place, and spent the longest time in the countryside

the school suspended classes due to the Cultural Revolution. From the mass posters, mass criticism, and mass solidarity campaigns to the "comprehensive seizure **of power**" and **the** "struggle, criticism, and reform" phases, as the movement progressed, the school became **the** factions. The factional struggles grew increasingly fierce, eventually escalating into armed clashes. Most pupils, myself included, eventually grew weary of this endless factional strife and became non-conformists, largely ceasing to attend school. Many even went long periods without being seen. Yet the moment Chairman Mao's latest directive was announced, all pupils sprang into action. Without prior arrangement, they converged en masse upon the school, inquiring about and scrambling to arrange matters for the Down to the Countryside Movement. At that time, the local and school Revolutionary Committees arranged for students to go to the countryside with remarkable speed and efficiency. Students from this secondary school were assigned to one commune, students from that secondary school to another commune, and each student was assigned to a specific commune and brigade. Within days, the entire plan was finalised. Thus, most students from our area arrived at their respective production teams before New Year's Day 1969, with the later arrivals all reaching the countryside by January 1969.

I departed before New Year's Day 1969, assigned to Jiangbei Brigade in Puzhen Commune within our city. Later, the state clarified that for urban educated youth sent to the countryside after 1962, their years of service would be counted consecutively from the start of their rural placement. Thus, when filling out my personal resume form, I entered "**December 1968**" as my commencement date of employment.

Looking back now, it was remarkable how swiftly so many urban secondary school students from **the 'three older cohorts'** across the nation departed their **urban** lives, leaving behind parents and families. Within mere days, weeks, or at most a month, **they** "packed their bags and set **off**" for the unfamiliar countryside. Truly a miracle. **Forty-eight** years have passed since then. The youngest of those youthful Third Cohort educated youths are now well into their sixties, having largely retired from their posts or withdrawn from active social life. Back then, they spent a unique chapter of their lives in the countryside – a time marked by hardship and joy, sacrifice and reward. The trials of the Down to the Countryside Movement tempered their youth, transforming them from naivety to maturity, from fervour to clarity, and from innocence to steadiness. All

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laid a solid foundation for their subsequent careers and lives. As a major event under specific historical conditions affecting countless families and hundreds of millions of people nationwide, the Down to the Countryside Movement remains an enduring historical symbol etched in the collective memory of an entire generation.

Interview Team: Hearing your account has deepened our understanding of the historical context of the educated youth movement during the Cultural Revolution. Both you and General Secretary Xi Jinping belonged to the "Old Third Cohort" of educated youth. Could you share your perspective on the General Secretary's seven-year experience as an educated youth, considering the broader national context of the movement?

HeYiting When examining General Secretary Xi Jinping's seven years as an educated youth within the broader context and framework of the nationwide movement, three distinct characteristics emerge: he was the youngest among the "three cohorts"; the northern Shaanxi region where he was assigned was among the most arduous locations for educated youth nationwide; and he was one of the very few who spent the longest period in the countryside.

Why was he the youngest? Those who lived through that era know that when junior and senior secondary school graduates from 1966, 1967, and 1968 were sent to the countryside in late 1968, the oldest senior secondary students—those from the 1966 cohort—were typically around twenty-one or twenty-two years old.

The youngest members of the first cohort of junior high school students, the Class of '68, were typically sixteen or seventeen years old. General Secretary Xi Jinping belonged to this cohort and was only fifteen when he was sent to the countryside. Among the four million educated youth of the "**three cohorts**" during that era, those of his age were undoubtedly the youngest and ~~a~~ very small minority.

The assertion that he was sent to the most arduous location requires consideration of the placement locations and methods for educated youth during the Down to the Countryside Movement. For the "three older cohorts" sent down, placement ~~comprised~~:

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there were four types: cross-provincial placement, intra-provincial cross-regional placement, intra-district cross-county placement, and local placement within the same county. The vast majority were placed within their home province, with most receiving local placement. Cross-provincial placements primarily involved the three municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, along with densely populated provinces such as Zhejiang, Sichuan, and Jiangsu. Youths from these areas were not only placed within their own municipality or province but also sent to other provinces and regions. The vast majority of Beijing's "**Old Third Cohort**" secondary school students ~~were~~ Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Jilin, Yunnan and other regions. Over 26,000 were assigned to Yan'an Prefecture in Shaanxi Province, among whom was General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Regarding the placement methods for educated youth, two primary approaches prevailed at the time. One involved serving as agricultural workers in units such as the Production and Construction Corps or state-owned forestry farms, agricultural farms, pasture farms, and grassland farms. The other, and most prevalent method, was settling in rural villages to become farmers. While both entailed going to the countryside, the circumstances of educated youth assigned to the Corps and those placed in rural villages differed markedly. Youth brigade members held the status of agricultural workers in state-owned enterprises, receiving a fixed monthly wage ranging from over 30 yuan to over 20 yuan. They were provided with state-supplied grain rations and enjoyed certain labour insurance benefits, ensuring basic material security. Consequently, joining the brigades became the preferred choice for educated youth. However, the political vetting criteria for brigade admission were stringent, making it difficult for those with unfavourable family backgrounds or political affiliations to gain entry. Those sent to rural communes had to earn their food through labour points, with most earning only a few jiao per day. Consequently, roughly half of these youths remained unable to support themselves financially and required regular remittances from their parents. My own commune placement was comparatively favourable; after deducting the cost of rations, I typically earned several dozen yuan annually, which allowed me to just about support myself.

Liangjiahe Village in Yanchuan County, where General Secretary Xi Jinping once worked as a sent-down youth, lies on the Loess Plateau. It undoubtedly ranked among the most challenging locations nationwide in terms of natural environment and living conditions for these youths. During a work visit to Liangjiahe several years ago, I witnessed its rugged terrain of towering mountains and deep ravines, underdeveloped transport links, barren soil,

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with scant rainfall and poor natural conditions. During the era of the educated youth, there was no electricity, no agricultural machinery whatsoever, and labour relied on the ancient hoe passed down through generations. The villagers faced numerous difficulties in accessing water, gathering firewood, and lighting their homes. The farmers toiled from dawn till dusk, yet the grain they harvested after a year of hard labour was barely enough to fill their stomachs. I once asked Lei Pingsheng, a Beijing educated youth who lived in the same cave dwelling as General Secretary Xi Jinping for six years: how much was a labour day worth in Liangjiahe during the placement period? Lei Pingsheng said that in the very first year after their arrival, 1968, each labour day was worth one jiao and one fen. By

1969 it rose to one jiao and two fen, an increase of one fen. As fellow former sent-down youths, we can imagine

that in those turbulent times, a fifteen-year-old boy raised in Beijing, arriving alone in that remote, windswept wilderness cut off by mountains, must have faced and resolved countless difficulties and problems in his labour and daily life!

Another 'most' is that General Secretary Xi Jinping spent a full seven years in the countryside, making him one of the very few among the nation's educated youth to have spent the longest period in the rural placement system. Back then, when we went to the countryside to settle as farmers, none of us knew how long we would actually have to stay. While some educated youth declared their intention to 'put down roots **in the countryside for life**', the vast majority harboured no desire to remain there permanently. Fortunately, by the winter of 1969, some educated youths in our area began enlisting in the military, offering a glimmer of hope for the future. After 1970, and particularly ~~from~~ 1972 onwards, increasing numbers of educated youths left the countryside through various avenues: military enlistment, factory recruitment, or university recommendations. By the end of 1972, most had departed rural areas. After spending nearly two and a half years in the countryside, I was recruited into a factory.

General Secretary Xi Jinping, however, spent seven years in the rural areas of northern Shaanxi, which was exceptionally rare among the "Old Third Cohort" educated youth. Recently, I reviewed materials concerning Beijing educated youth in Yan'an and learned that 26,200 **Beijing "Old Third Cohort"** educated youth were sent to Yan'an in 1969. In 1971, the state

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began recruiting them for factory jobs, administrative positions, further education, and military service.

By 1972,

8,387 were recruited for factory work, 1,179 were promoted to managerial positions, 553 were enlisted into the military, 648 were admitted to higher education institutions, while 1,188 returned to Beijing due to illness or hardship

returned to Beijing due to illness or hardship, totalling 11,955 departures. In 1973, among Beijing's educated youth, recruitment for factory work,

Recruitment of workers, cadres and students: 11,709 persons. In 1974, recruitment of workers, cadres and students totalled 769 persons,

with 472 returning to Beijing. In 1975, 250 were recruited for work or education, while 455 returned to Beijing. Thus, by the end of 1975

, only 590 Beijing educated youth remained in the rural areas of the entire Yan'an region, accounting for 2.3% of the 26,200 Beijing educated youth. Moreover, many of these 590 had stayed because they had married local farmers. By 1974, only two individuals remained in Liangjiahe Brigade of Wen'anyi Commune, Yancun County—where General Secretary Xi Jinping had been stationed—namely himself and Lei Pingsheng. After Lei Pingsheng was recommended for admission to Yan'an University in October 1974, Xi became the sole educated youth left in the entire brigade. Not only was he the last among Liangjiahe's educated youths to depart, but he also ranked among the very few Beijing-born educated youths in Yanchuan County—indeed, the entire Yan'an region—to leave the countryside so late. It was not until October 1975 that he was recommended for admission to Tsinghua University.

For us educated youths, as classmates and alumni who had come to the countryside together, seeing others gradually depart—whether enlisting, securing factory jobs, becoming cadres, pursuing further education, or through other avenues—while remaining behind in the village ourselves, was indeed a complex and anxious experience. The once-bustling dormitories of educated youths had become cold and deserted. From the educated youths and villagers of Liangjiahe, we learned that General Secretary Xi Jinping himself remained unhurried and unflustered during those years. He continued to work when work was required and study when study was needed, persistently and unwaveringly applying for Party membership. Not only did he join the Party, but he also became the secretary of the village Party branch. This composure, this resilience, this equanimity in accepting the ebb and flow of life – the gathering and dispersing of clouds, the blooming and fading of flowers – fills those of us who were once sent down with profound admiration.

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Interview Team: Hearing your account, it seems clear that General Secretary Xi was indeed the youngest among the three cohorts of educated youth, assigned to the harshest conditions, and spent the longest time in the countryside. Could you elaborate on how these seven formative years profoundly shaped his subsequent development?

He Yiting"The youngest, the most arduous location, the longest duration"— these three ~~in~~ can be said to be the defining characteristics of General Secretary Xi Jinping's rural placement experience. These seven years as an educated youth represented General Secretary Xi's first step into society after leaving school and home, and constituted a crucial stage in his life journey. Undoubtedly, they exerted a profound influence on his subsequent development. Drawing upon my own experiences as an educated youth, I believe the seven years in northern Shaanxi held particularly significant and far-reaching implications for General Secretary Xi's formative years, manifesting most notably in the following aspects.

Firstly, the harsh natural environment and arduous labour of the northern Shaanxi plateau forged his resolute and tenacious character, along with an indomitable spirit of perseverance. For educated youth, the transition from urban to rural life, from relatively privileged living conditions to universally arduous environments, from minimal prior physical labour to years of diverse agricultural tasks, and from dependence on parental support to complete self-reliance in both life and work – all represented substantial shifts. The trials they faced were considerable. For a considerable number of educated youths, particularly those like General Secretary Xi Jinping who were only fifteen or sixteen at the time, the trials endured during their rural placement exceeded their psychological and physical endurance.

Two incidents from my time in the countryside remain vivid in my memory. The first occurred ~~around~~ six months after my arrival, ~~in June 1969~~

, coinciding with the "**double rush**" season. The educated youths in our brigade worked alongside the farmers, racing to harvest summer crops like wheat while simultaneously planting autumn crops such as rice seedlings. The strain was immense. I recall my first trip to the wheat fields, some four or five li outside the village, to carry sheaves of wheat. At just over 1.6 metres tall and weighing barely 80 jin,

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weighing just over 80 jin. My shoulders had little flesh, and the ~~poles~~—tapered at both ends and ~~square~~ middle—gouged my shoulders until they were red and swollen. With no respite allowed midway, I gritted my teeth and persevered, making trip after trip. The other incident involved delivering the village's public grain to the state granary. With both hands behind my back, I supported a sack filled with nearly 200 jin of rice, navigating a path just 50 centimetres wide and 10 centimetres thick.

The wooden planks, step by step, moved towards the grain silo some ten metres high. As the planks swayed slightly up and down, my legs would occasionally buckle and grow weak, making it seem I might fall off the planks at any moment. During my time in the countryside, I undertook many arduous tasks: the heavy labour of delivering grain quotas, the gruelling work of the "double rush" harvest season, and the perilous duties at water conservancy and railway construction sites—swinging sledgehammers to drill blast holes and igniting detonators for blasting.

This led me to reflect on General Secretary Xi Jinping's own experience during his time in northern Shaanxi. The hardships he endured and the difficulties he faced were incomparable to those of us educated youths from elsewhere. When the General Secretary travelled from the capital, Beijing, to northern Shaanxi, the stark contrast in living conditions and circumstances was far greater than what we, the locally born educated youths, experienced. In northern Shaanxi, farm labour is referred to as "enduring hardship," and farmers are called "fathers"—a stark testament to the harsh realities of rural life. Notable leaders of the late Ming peasant uprisings—Gao Yingxiang, Li Zicheng, Zhang Xianzhong—were all born in Northern Shaanxi, true sons of the land. Why did they rally their followers to rebel? Fundamentally, it was because life here was too harsh and impoverished. When poverty strikes, people yearn for change; when poverty strikes, they rise up in revolt! During the educated youth's placement period, it was precisely because of Northern Shaanxi's harsh natural environment and arduous labour that some Beijing-born youths fled in terror shortly after arriving. I recall reading that some female educated youths from Beijing, unable to endure the gruelling labour demands of northern Shaanxi, married local farmers to reduce their share of the heavy farmwork.

Years later, in his essay "I Am a Son of the Yellow Earth," General Secretary Xi Jinping recalled: Leaving the capital for northern Shaanxi, I initially felt profoundly lonely. Being so young, I had no notion of staying long-term. While other educated youths toiled daily in the mountains, I took things rather casually. Later, through the guidance of my aunt and uncle

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, I soon integrated into the new rural environment of northern Shaanxi. I consciously embraced the hardships of life, overcoming challenges with fleas, unfamiliar food, demanding labour, and ideological struggles over the years. I became a strong labourer in the village and a skilled farmer. The Beijing educated youths and farmers of Liangjiahe recount that throughout his years in the countryside, Xi Jinping consistently shared the hardships and joys of the masses. He undertook every arduous, exhausting, dirty, and dangerous task, always volunteering for them and never "shirking" – meaning he never cut corners. Adversity refines character. His seven years in northern Shaanxi tempered his character, forging an indomitable spirit and unwavering resolve, while cultivating an ethos of self-reliance and lofty aspirations. With this "bowl of wine as a foundation," what trials and tribulations could possibly stand in the way of his future endeavours? As the General Secretary reflected on his rural placement: "Those seven years of arduous life in the countryside tempered me greatly. Whenever I later faced difficulties, I recalled how we could accomplish tasks under such harsh conditions back then—why couldn't we manage now? No hardship could match that level of challenge." Recalling this when facing difficulties makes one feel that no problem is insurmountable ."

Secondly, the seven-year experience as an educated youth grounded him in reality, deepened his understanding of national conditions, brought him close to the people, and allowed him to genuinely feel their joys and sorrows, cultivating a profound bond with the masses. What distinguished the educated youth sent to villages from those assigned to military corps, farms, or forestry stations was their immediate placement within villages and production teams. They became inseparable from the land, working shoulder to shoulder with farmers. This immersion enabled them to gain profound insights into rural life, the farmers, and the most authentic, grassroots reality of China at that time.

I recall that when the educated youths in our brigade first arrived in the village, we spent nearly a month rotating through farmers' homes for meals. We ate our way through almost every household in the production team of several dozen families. This gave us a direct glimpse into village life and the people's circumstances. We saw that the farmers lived in low thatched cottages, that their homes contained little beyond a few worn-out pieces of furniture, and that some farmers would

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save a little kerosene money, would retire to bed as soon as it grew dark if they had no urgent tasks. We also witnessed the rural shortage of medical care and medicines, the profound backwardness in education and culture, and so on. All this gave us a certain shock and education right from our arrival in the countryside. Subsequently, through years of arduous life and constant interaction with the farming masses, we truly experienced the toil of farming and the hardship of making ends meet. We came to understand the profound meaning of the verse, "Who knows the toil behind each grain of rice on our plate?" We personally felt the joys and sorrows, the joys and sorrows of the farmers, and the hardships of their lives. We also felt their indomitable spirit of struggle for survival and for a better life. All this laid a solid foundation for our reading of the unwritten book of society, increased our understanding of the national situation, and had a significant impact on our later growth and development.

President Xi Jinping spent seven formative years in northern Shaanxi. The memory of the local villagers labouring year-round yet struggling to feed themselves must have been etched deeply into his consciousness. Such experiences and insights were naturally far more profound, distinctive, and unforgettable than those of us educated youth who were sent to the countryside from more privileged backgrounds. He similarly recalled in his essay "I Am a Son of the Yellow Earth": "When I first arrived in the countryside, beggars would often come during the spring ploughing season. Some Beijing educated youths held the notion that beggars were undesirable, even '**bad elements'** or '**good-for-nothings**'. They refused to give them food, and some even set dogs on them to chase them away." Did they realise the local saying: "Plump in January, lean in February, half-dead in March and April." By March and April, every household subsisted on "half a year's rations of bran and vegetables." Wives would take the children begging while reserving grain for the able-bodied men to sustain them through the spring ploughing. Such realities only dawned on the educated youth after living in the countryside for some time. This insight into the local populace's impoverished circumstances enabled the General Secretary to recognise what the common folk lacked most, needed most, and yearned for most. It spurred him on, compelling him to strive to deliver tangible benefits for his fellow villagers. In Liangjihe, he organised and led the masses in road construction, silt-trapping dam building, establishing an ironworks cooperative, setting up a commission shop, digging large-diameter wells, and developing biogas. Through his own hands-on, hard work, he led by example.

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The masses strive to achieve a better life. During the Yan'an period, Xi Zhongxun was hailed by Chairman Mao as “**a leader of the people who emerged from the masses**”. President Xi Jinping inherited the noble qualities of his revolutionary forebears. During his seven years of rural placement in northern Shaanxi, he underwent a profound transformation from an inexperienced youth into a "hardworking lad" in the eyes of the people – a guide wholly dedicated to improving their lives. Years later, he reflected: “**The greatest gain from those seven years in northern Shaanxi was learning what practicality means, what seeking truth from facts entails, and what the masses truly represent. These are lessons that have benefited me throughout my life.**”

Thirdly, Yan'an's red historical culture and the collective character of the people of northern Shaanxi – characterised by broad-mindedness, tolerance, integrity, simplicity and dedication – nourished his lofty political ideals and forged his **unwavering** original ~~the~~ Yan'an region where General Secretary Xi Jinping once worked as a sent-down youth was the final destination of the Long March by the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, the birthplace of the Yan'an Spirit, the ground where Mao Zedong Thought matured, and the launching point for seizing national power. During the 28 years from the founding of the Communist Party of China to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, our Party centred its activities in Yan'an for nearly half that time, weaving a great legend of transforming the land and turning the tide of history upon this loess plateau. Yan'an's profound and rich red historical and cultural heritage naturally exerted a powerful positive influence on shaping the worldview, outlook on life, and values of the Beijing educated youth, particularly exerting a profoundly moving and nourishing effect on the General Secretary, who hailed from a revolutionary family.

As we all know, the General Secretary's father was one of the founders of the Shaanxi-Gansu Revolutionary Base Area, while his mother was a veteran cadre who grew up drinking the waters of the Yan River. The revolutionary spirit flows through his veins, instilling in him an innate reverence and affinity for the Communist Party. During his time in the countryside in northern Shaanxi, labouring and living on the loess plateau where his forebears had long fought, lingering in contemplation at Baota Mountain and the banks of the Yan River, paying homage to revolutionary sites such as the earthen cave dwellings where great men and revolutionary leaders once worked and resided, listening to the tales of youth recounted by veteran Red Army soldiers, Red Guards, and Eighth Route Army veterans who had participated in the revolution... These fragments of experience, these sights and sounds, gave him a tangible understanding of the hardships his forebears endured in founding the nation.

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ground understanding of the hardships endured by his forebears in building their enterprise. It provided him with a tangible grasp of the Yan'an Spirit of self-reliance and arduous struggle. It deepened his intuitive appreciation for the communist outlook on life, worldview, and revolutionary ideals instilled in him from childhood. And it fostered a profound affection for the loess plateau of Yan'an, the very soil that nurtured the Chinese Revolution. This spiritual nourishment, this baptism of the soul, this elevation of thought not only laid the ideological foundation for him to endure the arduous trials of rural life but also strengthened his conviction to believe in and follow the Communist Party of China. He wrote eight applications to join the Communist Youth League and ten applications to join the Communist Party. His persistent pursuit, arduous tempering, and the trust of the masses finally saw his aspiration to join the Party approved, and he was even appointed as the Party branch secretary of the production brigade. He later reflected: "When I arrived on the loess plateau at fifteen, I was lost and uncertain; when I left at twenty-two, I possessed a firm life goal and was filled with confidence." As a public servant, the Shaanbei plateau remains my roots, for it nurtured my unwavering conviction: to serve the people through tangible deeds! Wherever I may go, I shall forever remain a son of the loess plateau.

On several occasions, I have journeyed to northern Shaanxi, climbing high to gaze into the distance. The Loess Plateau stretches vast and majestic, encircled by mountains, imbued with a sense of wonder. This profoundly rich loess land once embraced with open arms the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, who had traversed most of China, becoming the grand stage where the Chinese Communists wove the legend of the red revolution. Over thirty years later, it similarly welcomed with open arms twenty-six thousand young Beijing educated youths who had left their homes, becoming the place where this cohort of secondary school students underwent the baptism of youth. The educated youths of Liangjiahe told me that the people of northern Shaanxi are hardworking, kind-hearted, honest and unpretentious. Though lacking formal education and unable to articulate profound truths, they instinctively understood the hardships faced by these Beijing youths far from their parents. They cared for them with genuine affection, teaching them farming, gathering firewood, and cooking with hands on guidance. They helped the youths navigate the initial hurdles of rural life and labour, allowing them to experience the warmth of the local people. Decades later, Beijing youths still speak fondly of Yan'an, universally describing its people as kind and endearing. The unbreakable bonds forged with the locals remain a cherished memory.

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President Xi Jinping himself had been sent to northern Shaanxi as the son of a "**counter-revolutionary element**". In that era when "**class struggle was the guiding principle**", factors such as family background and parents' political status placed immense psychological pressure on some educated youths. Yet the local villagers in northern Shaanxi judged the youths more by their own conduct and actions during their placement. It was precisely because of this that he was able to join the Party, become secretary of the village Party branch, and be recommended for university admission. Recalling these memories, the General Secretary spoke with deep emotion: "The people of Yan'an selflessly aided and protected me, and above all, their sincere and unpretentious character profoundly influenced and nurtured my spirit. Though I left physically, my heart remained here!"

Fourthly, during his seven years in the countryside, he utilised the relatively relaxed and free socio-political environment to persist in reading and studying, accumulating a rich foundation of knowledge, culture, and theoretical understanding. **the "three cohorts"** of educated youths sent to the countryside during that era (), only a small proportion were high school graduates; the majority were junior high school students. **The 1967 and 1968 cohorts** had their education interrupted by **the Cultural Revolution** (), them from completing a full junior high school education. By today's standards, labelling such junior high school students as "educated youths" would be inaccurate. The educational and cultural gaps among these educated youths were not particularly noticeable during that era of slow productive development. However, with the advancement of the times and the rapid progress of science and technology, this increasingly became a **significant disadvantage** for them. Precisely after the "**three cohorts**" of educated youths left the countryside to return to urban work, only a very small proportion engaged in high-tech or senior economic and trade activities. The majority were employed in ordinary skilled labour.

Objectively, being sent to the countryside provided an environment conducive to self-directed study. Though life was austere for these educated youths, compared to their counterparts in the Production Corps, they enjoyed greater political latitude and freedom of movement. The extent of their labour participation, frequency of home visits, and duration of leave were largely determined by the individuals themselves. Objectively speaking, the time available for reading and study among these educated youths was still ample.

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Particularly during the period between the autumn harvest and sowing until the spring ploughing the following year—this "winter fallow" timesaw fewer farm duties, affording relatively uninterrupted periods for reading and study. Yet this coincided with the Cultural Revolution era, when intellectuals were denounced as the "stinking ninth category," and fallacies such as "education is useless" and "the more knowledge, the more reactionary" ran rampant.

Influenced by this prevailing social ideology, coupled with bleak prospects for the future and uncertain career paths, and with older educated youths also facing practical issues like marriage and romance, many essentially abandoned reading and learning. Naturally, a significant number of educated youths adhered to the ancient adage: " " ("Opening a book is beneficial") and " " ("Reading enriches the mind"), viewing study as a means to enrich their rural existence, cultivate their spiritual world, and elevate their personal cultivation. They sought out various books, reading and studying during evenings and agricultural downtime. During my two-plus years in the countryside, I developed a particular interest in and read extensively from historical and political works, including biographies of Chinese and foreign historical and political figures, alongside renowned literary classics from home and abroad. These included works such as *Outline of Chinese History* edited by Jian Bozan, *A General History of China from the Qin Dynasty to the Present* edited by Fan Wenlan and Cai Meibiao, *General History of China*, Li Xin's *General History of the New Democratic Revolution Period in China*, Li Shu's *Chinese Politics Before and After the Xinhai Revolution*, Hu Sheng's *Imperialism and Chinese Politics*, as well as works reflecting Nazi Germany's history like *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and Churchill's *The Second World War*, were all read during my time in the countryside. After the restoration of the university entrance examinations, I applied for a humanities programme. I achieved high marks in literature, history, geography, and politics with minimal effort, ultimately gaining admission to the History Department of Beijing Normal University.

General Secretary Xi Jinping's passion for reading and learning is well known to all who have interacted with him. When he went to Shaanbei as a sent-down youth, he took only two suitcases, both filled with books. Throughout his seven years there, he persisted in diligent study and deep reflection, often reading by lamplight until the early hours. Regarding the General Secretary's reading habits during his time in the countryside, you have already interviewed numerous villagers from Liangjiahe and Beijing-sent youths—eyewitnesses who recounted many vivid and authentic observations, all published in the *Study Times*.

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Having reviewed your interviews, I sense that the breadth and depth of his reading during that period far surpassed our own. When serving as President of the Central Party School, the General Secretary explicitly emphasised that leading cadres must cherish reading, select quality books, and cultivate effective reading habits – principles he himself embodied during his time in Shaanbei. As the ancients observed, “A mind enriched by literature naturally radiates **grace**.” Through persistent reading and study, the General Secretary cultivated profound cultural literacy, knowledge, moral integrity, and theoretical depth. Over the years, I have had the privilege of listening to General Secretary Xi Jinping speak on numerous occasions. His addresses are richly illustrated with references, effortlessly drawn from memory, delivered with wit and charm, and brimming with confidence. The more I listen, the more I appreciate their distinctive flavour, character, and substance – the more I find myself wanting to hear more. This depth of learning, this refinement, this breadth of vision are the result of years of honing his skills, with the seven years of study in Liangjiahe undoubtedly playing a crucial role.

Interview Team: You have just analysed the significance and influence of those seven years in northern Shaanxi within President Xi Jinping's formative journey from four perspectives. It has been most enlightening. As our final interviewee, we would like to conclude this interview by inviting you to offer a concluding summary.

He Yiting: The ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius observed: “When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on a man, it first afflicts his mind with suffering, exhausts his body with labour, exposes him to hunger, impoverishes him, and disrupts his actions. This is to stir his resolve, temper his character, and enhance his capabilities.” The philosophy encapsulated in Mencius's words is imbued with pragmatism and dialectics. Looking back, those seven years in northern Shaanxi represented General Secretary Xi Jinping's first station in life where he endured hardship to temper his spirit, labour to strengthen his body, and deprivation to sharpen his resolve. It served as a crucial starting point for him to comprehend life, China, and the Communist Party of China. Here, he acquired knowledge beyond textbooks, gaining a lifelong treasure trove of wisdom not written in any book. This laid a solid foundation for his subsequent growth and advancement.

After leaving Liangjiahe, he entered Tsinghua University, the nation's premier institution of higher learning, to acquire knowledge and broaden his horizons.

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Upon graduating, he joined senior leadership bodies, further broadening his horizons and enhancing his capabilities. He then immersed himself at the county level, serving directly as county Party secretary – a role akin to "frontline commander" and continued to undertake practical work in key leadership positions at county, municipal, and provincial levels. Seven years in northern Shaanxi, four at Tsinghua, three within the Central Military Commission's organs, three in Zhengding, seventeen in Fujian, five in Zhejiang, nearly one in Shanghai, five at the highest central level – culminating in his election as General Secretary of the Party at the 18th National Congress. From village Party branch secretary to General Secretary of the Party, from ordinary citizen to President of the State, from junior officer to Chairman of the Central Military Commission. From the northwest to North China, then to the southeast coastal regions. He has lived in China's western, central, and eastern regions; served at every tier of Party and state leadership; and embodied the roles of farmer, university student, soldier, and cadre. Such rich experience, honed across so many pivotal leadership positions and accumulated over such an extended period of practical engagement, constitutes invaluable capital for effective leadership.

Recently, I came across an assessment stating: General Secretary Xi Jinping is a leader of our Party who matured within a profound revolutionary milieu; a leader who grew through our Party's history of hardship and twists and turns; a leader forged in prolonged revolutionary practice; a leader established in the new great struggle; a leader developed through major international contests; and a leader nurtured among the people. This assessment is profoundly insightful, incisive and accurate, and fully consistent with reality. As you are aware, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee made a major political decision, explicitly affirming General Secretary Xi Jinping as the core of the Party Central Committee and the entire Party, formally proposing the concept of

"the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core." This significant political decision rests upon a solid foundation of political, ideological, popular and practical support. Its profound practical significance and far-reaching historical importance will become increasingly evident with the passage of time and the development of practice.

The Learning Times has published an interview transcript reflecting General Secretary Xi Jinping's seven years as an educated youth in Liangjiahe.

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The selection of topics is excellent, and the format is novel. You delved into the grassroots frontline, engaging in face-to-face conversations with the villagers and educated youth in Liangjiahe who once shared meals, lodging, and labour with the General Secretary. The interviewees recounted authentic stories from that era with vivid, unadorned language and credible content. They vividly presented to readers the moving deeds of the General Secretary diligently pursuing his work during his youth, allowing people to see clearly that the people's leader truly comes from the people and truly serves the people. I have noted that the publication of your interview transcripts has resonated deeply with readers, eliciting an exceptionally positive response. **This** has served to bolster the "Four Consciousnesses" among both officials and the masses, generating a powerful positive force.

To elaborate further, this series of interview transcripts represents an innovative endeavour in both content and form regarding how to better promote our Party's leaders. Promoting Party leaders requires not only specialised works and theoretical articles, but also improvements and innovations in both form and content based on the reading preferences and acceptance levels of a broad readership under new circumstances. This ensures readers genuinely wish to engage with the material, receiving education, inspiration, and emotional resonance unconsciously through their reading. This aligns with General Secretary Xi Jinping's repeated emphasis on developing a new discourse system. I believe your explorations in this area are beneficial.

Finally, I wish to emphasise that the extraordinary journeys of our Party's leaders in serving the Party and the people, along with the invaluable spiritual legacy embedded within their experiences, possess irreplaceable historical, ideological and spiritual significance. Faithfully documenting these chapters of their lives and presenting them to readers, the people and history through diverse formats – thereby fully leveraging history's role in illuminating the present, informing governance and nurturing future generations – is, in my view, a profoundly meaningful and worthy endeavour! Regarding General Secretary Xi Jinping's extraordinary journey, you have already recounted his story as an educated youth. If possible, I encourage you to continue narrating the subsequent chapters of his narrative.